



SONS
OF
PANDU



MATHURAM BHoothalingam

S O N S O F P A N D U

by

MATHURAM BHoothalingam

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MY GRAND MOTHER

Whose wonderful story-telling inspired this book.

OTHER BOOKS BY THE AUTHOR

TAMIL

| | | |
|--------------------|-----|--------------|
| PUTHAI NADUVIL | ... | <i>Novel</i> |
| SATYAMEVA | ... | <i>Novel</i> |
| PON KOONDU | ... | <i>Novel</i> |
| MANATHILE ORU MARU | ... | <i>Plays</i> |
| VASAVESWARAM | ... | <i>Novel</i> |

ENGLISH

THE STORY OF RAMA ... *Illustrated
with sculpture plates*

GERMAN

RAMAYANA ... *Illustrated
in black & white*

INTRODUCTION

Hundreds of years ago, on the field of Kurukshetra, the entire warrior race of North India destroyed itself in a great battle. The events that led up to this disaster are recounted in the Mahabharata. As in all ancient epics, the story is based on historical facts, embellished by myth and legend. A major battle between two princely families, related by blood, seems to have taken place round about the sixth century B.C., but the epic itself was composed some five hundred years later. The spirit of the times which the story reflects is therefore rather of this latter period. I give the main story here in a short form as the 'Sons of Pandu'.

About a thousand years before the battle, a branch of the Aryan race had come into India from the Central Asian steppes and settled along the river Indus, known to the neighbouring Persians as the 'Hindu'. In the valley of the Indus, 'the Hindus', as the settlers came to be called, evolved from simple pastoral beginnings a more sophisticated form of society. Their earliest religious beliefs stemmed from the imagination of a people who lived close to nature. They believed in gods who were symbolic of the elemental and blind forces of nature, and sang hymns of praise to them. These songs, which form the earliest Hindu scriptures, were thought to have been 'revealed' to wise men by divine grace. 'The Vedas', as they were called, were

accepted and handed down orally from father to son for the benefit of succeeding generations.

The elemental gods manifested themselves in an infinite variety of forms, on the earth, in the waters, plants, trees, and above all in the minds of men. Indra, the lord of them all, was the master of the elements and god of rain and thunder. The ancient Hindus prayed to him whenever there was drought in the land. Arjuna, the greatest of the heroes in the story, was born of Indra.

Vayu, the god of wind, was inconceivably strong and rode through space in the swiftest of cars.

Surya, the sun god, was honoured and worshipped in a special way as the very source of life and light.

Agni, the god of fire, was thought to be the oldest of them all. He was worshipped in the form of the sacrificial fire. Men also honoured him as the messenger who carried their prayers to the gods.

Yama, the god of death, was looked upon as one who opened the gateway to bliss rather than someone who inspired terror. He was the very embodiment of wisdom and justice and was therefore also known as the god of Dharma. In our story, the eldest son of Pandu was born of him.

By the time of the battle of Kurukshetra, these simple religious beliefs and forms of worship had changed a great deal. The pattern of life and society had become more complex. By the sixth century B. C. there emerged a Hindu pantheon more in conformity with the now transformed Aryan society. The elemental gods of the Vedas had receded into the background, giving way to the omnipotent Trinity of present day Hinduism. The supreme Trinity—Vishnu, Brahma and Siva—symbolised the forces of preservation, creation and destruction. Vishnu, the divine saviour and protector of mankind against evil, often manifested himself on earth. Krishna, the king of Dwaraka, a close friend of the heroes of the Mahabharata, was believed to be the eighth incarnation of Vishnu. Besides the Trinity the Hindu pantheon contained many gods and goddesses of great power, such as Ganesa, the elephant-headed son of Siva.

In this developed society, what was known as Dharma provided the guide to the right way of life. This Dharma embodied not only civil and social laws but codes of behaviour for every kind of social, religious and ethical conduct. To follow Dharma was the duty of all, and kings and sages strove to sustain it. Indeed, when Dharma was endangered, the Supreme Being Himself came down to earth to preserve it.

The laws of Dharma prescribed the duties of the four castes into which society was divided. The Brahmins were the spiritual guides of the people. They kept the torch of learning alight, for it was they who taught the Vedas and interpreted the Dharma. From the Kshatriya caste came the kings and the warriors of the land. It was their duty to defend the country and uphold Dharma. The Vaisyas were the backbone of Hindu society. They looked after the important professions of trade, banking and finance. The Sudras were the peasants who tilled the soil. They were the salt of the earth.

Besides his duty to society, it was laid down that the true goal of each individual should be 'moksha' or final liberation from the bonds of the world. To become fit to reach this ultimate goal, every man had to live in accordance with Dharma, enduring the pleasures and pains of a normal life. For such a purpose, his life was divided into four stages. The first twentyfour years should be spent in strict abstinence, in deep study and discipline. The best part of his middle years should be given to the pleasures of a householder, the upholding of Dharma and serving of society to the best of his capacity. The third part of his life had to be passed in retirement, in the forest. There, away from the world of perpetual action, he should meditate in peace and think out the means of attaining 'moksha'. The fourth and the last part of a man's life should be devoted to the actual pursuit of this final liberation from the bonds of the flesh.

The author of this epic was a great sage called Vyasa. He was a relative of the family and often appeared in the story in person. Vyasa was a sage of such immeasurable merit that the gods had conferred divine powers on him and he could, in turn, bestow miraculous boons on whomsoever he liked.

The Mahabharata consists of one hundred thousand verses. It is an epic of great beauty and pathos. Its gentle humanity is deeply moving, and its appeal universal. In India, to this day, it is told and retold by learned men, and vast assemblies listen to it entranced.

CHAPTER I

King Santanu got out of his chariot and walked along the sands of the river Ganga. He was in deep thought.

Would she appear again? Would he be able to see her once more? What if she gave up her daily walk as suddenly as she had started it? He must speak to her; he must tell her he loved her before it was too late. Would she listen? Would she marry him if he asked her?

The king scanned the horizon looking for the strange but beautiful woman who walked there every day. As far as one could see there was nothing but sand and water. Then all at once, she appeared at the water's edge, so suddenly that the king imagined she had risen from the Ganga. He went towards her and quickly stretching out his hand, boldly took hers, although he trembled inwardly.

"Who are you? Why do you wander here alone every day?" he asked.

She smiled and disengaged her hand. The king drew in his breath sharply.

"Whoever you are, I have fallen in love with you. Will you marry me?"

She bent her head. "Yes. Who could refuse the mightiest of the Kurus?"

"How do you know who I am?" said the king in surprise.

"It is enough that I know. You are Santanu, ruler of one of the most powerful kingdoms in the world," she said.

Delighted by these words, Santanu again tried to take her hands. She drew back quickly.

"If I marry you, first promise never to oppose me in anything I do. Never ask who I am or whence I come," she cried.

The king was so much in love that he did not care what promises he made. He gave his word and before she could protest, lifted her on to his chariot and drove off towards Hastinapura.

The golden domes of the capital of the Kurus glowed in the setting sun, as the king drove in with the bride. The drawbridge fell with a clang over the moat and the sentries drew up at the gate as the royal horses clattered past. The air was perfumed by the smoke from the sacred fires and the king heard the auspicious chanting of the Vedas at evening prayer. Before him gleamed the white walls of his silver palace. King Santanu, the mighty ruler at whose approach the whole world trembled, went in with the bride of his choice. In the great hall, with its arched pillars and golden throne, stood waiting the nobles and ministers of his court. As he passed, they bowed to him with ceremony.

For many years King Santanu lived happily with his queen. So tender and affectionate was she that daily the king's love for her deepened. Yet every time she had a son she did something that horrified him. She threw the newborn babe into the river. The king watched her with an agonised heart but said nothing for fear she would leave him. When the eighth son came and the queen again prepared to drown it, the king could no longer contain himself.

"How can you bear to be so cruel?" he cried to his wife.

The queen turned to him. "Here is your son. Take him and let me go," she said sadly. Bewildered, the king looked at her.

"I am Ganga, goddess of this sacred river. I came here, to earth, at the request of these eight sons of yours. They are gods who were condemned to be born as mortals because of a curse. They begged me to marry you and be their mother. It was their wish that I should drown them as soon as they were born so that they could speedily return to their own world. The time has come when we must part for I was to stay with you only until the last son came. Here he is. Unlike the others, he is destined to live long on this earth and win fame for himself.



The goddess disappeared.

Take care of him. I must go now, for my task here is finished." The goddess disappeared into the river as mysteriously as, long ago, she had risen from it.

Santanu's sorrow knew no bounds. He had loved Ganga dearly and was heartbroken at the loss. He would have felt he had nothing to live for had it not been for his little son. On him the king lavished all his love and the eighth son of Santanu proved worthy of his father's care. He grew up a truly noble prince and because of his divine origin was blessed with qualities that were more than human. A mighty warrior, a skilful archer, he was also a fine scholar. His knowledge of the Vedas was great. Soon he came to expound Dharma, or the rule of life, as nobody else could. With all this he was happy, sweet tempered, and courteous alike to high and low. No wonder the people loved him and rejoiced greatly when King Santanu declared him his heir apparent. Years went by. The king devoted himself to his kingdom and his son. He refused to marry again for he still mourned the loss of Ganga.

One day, while out hunting, he came to the river Yamuna. Wishing to rest his tired horses, he got down from his chariot and strolled along the sands. Suddenly there came to him an overpowering fragrance. He looked around for the cause of it but saw nothing. He walked towards the place whence the perfume came floating on the breeze. He saw a girl seated on a rock overlooking the water and realised that this was the fragrant flower which was giving out the sweet perfume. Amazed, he questioned her.

"I am Satyavati," she said. "Though the daughter of a fisherman and living with fish, I am as fragrant as sandalwood because of the boon of a sage." Once more Santanu fell in love but this time he found it less easy to win his bride. Satyavati's father was a cunning old man.

"My daughter shall wed you only if you promise that her sons and not the son of Ganga will be kings after you," he said.

King Santanu returned home with a heavy heart. He could not deny the throne to his first born, Ganga's son—most dear to him and already, in the sight of his people, the acknowledged heir to the kingdom. At the same time, he wished to marry Satyavati more than anything else in the world. Torn between his two desires, he fell into a state of hopeless gloom. The prince noticed that his father neither ate, slept nor followed the chase as he used to but wandered about as if stricken with great sorrow. It did not take him long to discover why.

He sought out the fisherman and promised him that his grandsons should be kings after Santanu. The fisherman laughed.

"It is all very well for you to say that you give up all claims to the throne but what about your sons? How can I be sure that they will not dispute the succession? What if they should seize the kingdom for themselves? Being your sons, they would have the power," he said.

The prince was stung by the fisherman's words. He drew himself up proudly. Then raising his arms up to heaven he swore

he would never marry but remain single all his life. At this supreme oath, the heavens thundered applause and divine voices cried, 'Bhisma.....Bhisma,' blessing the high-souled prince. From then onwards the son of Ganga was known as Bhisma or he of the terrible vow.

Bhisma lived up to the end of the great war and was held in high esteem by all. He was the Kuru elder statesman, their wise counsellor and guide.

When Santanu heard about the vow, he embraced his son warmly.

"You have made me most happy. You shall have a long and glorious life and at the end of it you shall have the power to choose your time of death," he said granting him a precious boon.

Bhisma's deeds heightened the glory of the Kurus. It was he who won brides for the sons of Satyavati by his prowess and spread the fame of the Kurus throughout the world with his feats of chivalry. Satyavati's sons died young but she had two grandsons, Dhritarashtra and Pandu. Dhritarashtra, the elder, was blind and could not undertake the duties of royalty. So it came about that Pandu ruled as king at Hastinapura.

CHAPTER 2

King Pandu was a true son of the Kuru dynasty. Bhisma himself taught him the rule of Dharma. Moreover, as a great warrior he was feared and respected by the neighbouring kings. Indeed, he seemed to have been blessed in every way for he had two beautiful queens, Kunti and Madri, who loved him dearly. The king lived happily, wanting nothing, afraid of nothing.

It was then that misfortune struck. One day, while chasing deer, Pandu killed a stag that was mating with a doe. Now this stag was really a powerful sage and while dying laid a curse upon Pandu that he should never have a son. In great grief, the king gave up his life of pleasure and retired to the forest with his two wives. Dhritarashtra looked after the kingdom with the help of his ministers and Bhisma, his wise uncle.

Pandu lived in the forest as sages do, fasting, praying and meditating. Outwardly, he seemed content but queen Kunti saw that he often brooded over the curse.

"Do not worry, my king. I think I can help you. I know some mantras (prayers) taught to me by a sage when I was young. If I chant them the gods themselves will help you to have sons," she said.

Kunti then invoked the gods with her prayers. Pleased, those celestial beings came to her in all their shining splendour and each of them gave sons to her and Madri to whom she had taught the prayers. They were equal to the gods in grace and beauty.

The eldest was born of the God Dharma and he was called Dharmaputra or the son of Dharma. Bhima, the second was the son of Vayu the wind god. The third, Arjuna, was born of Indra, the lord of the heavens. Queen Madri had twins, Nakula and Sahadeva by the twin gods, Aswins.

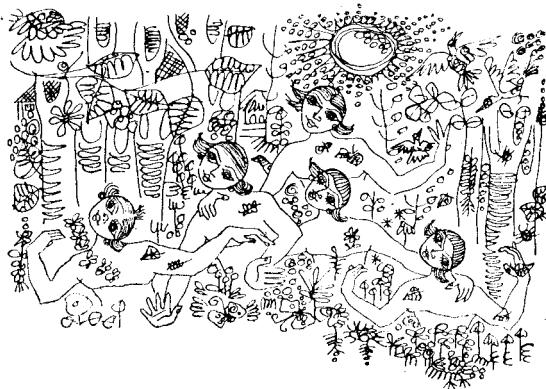
The care faded out of King Pandu's face for now he had five fine sons. They were called the Pandavas or the sons of Pandu. The king

had made his home among the sages of the forest and here the Pandavas grew up in carefree happiness. The sages taught them the Vedas and for the rest they roamed the woods.

Dharmaputra had a noble bearing. He carried himself like a king. Bhima was big and powerful, broad-shouldered, deep-chested. Arjuna was the most attractive of the five; his slim body was tough as whipcord, his hair was curly, his eyes laughed. Already he looked the great hero he was to become. Nakula and Sahadeva sparkled with the grace and wisdom of the Aswins. Together the five brothers made a picture of beauty, strength and happiness.

King Pandu did not live to see them grow into manhood. He died when Dharmaputra was just sixteen. Queen Madri followed him soon.

The sages of the forest now took Kunti and the boys to Bhisma at Hastinapura. He was overjoyed to see them. The blind king too welcomed them with open arms though he grieved to hear of his brother's death. Gandhari, his queen was doubly happy now that she had Pandu's sons in addition to her own. She called the Pandavas to hear and fondly stroked them with her hands. She could not see, for to keep her husband company she had vowed to remain blind-folded all her life.



The Pandavas grew up in carefree happiness.

King Dhritarashtra and Queen Gandhari had a hundred sons. They were called the Kauravas or the sons of Kuru. The eldest of them was Duryodhana who almost equalled Bhima in strength and valour. The king sent for his sons so that they could meet the Pandavas. The Kauravas eyed their cousins warily. "Is it possible that they are more than a match for us?" they wondered. Duryodhana came forward with a jaunty air. "Care to wrestle?" he asked Bhima lightly. Bhima answered by picking up a few of the Kauravas and scattering them on the floor like beads from a string. The proud Duryodhana flushed.

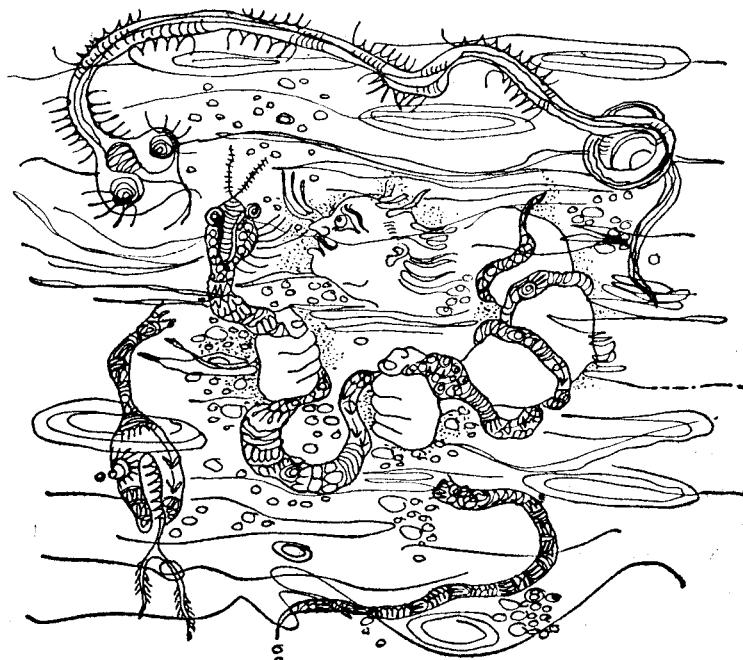
Whenever they played together the Pandavas appeared stronger than the Kauravas. Bhima could run as fast as the wind and Arjuna's arrow found its mark too often for the Kauravas' peace of mind. The five boys teased their cousins and played tricks on them. Bhima, in particular, was often found ragging them. He would seize them by the hair or drag them along the ground hurting their knees. He would hold a few of them under water until they spluttered for breath. Sometimes, if they were on a tree, he would shake it, letting them fall to the ground like ripe fruit. The Kauravas deeply resented this bullying, especially Duryodhana, glowering and silent.

"It is a long time since we had any water sports. Let us spend a day by the river," said Duryodhana to the Pandavas. There was a smile on his sulky face. The cousins agreed.

Duryodhana built a beautiful pavillion on the water front and had it gaily decorated. He sent his best cooks there so that they might have a feast after the sports. Then he said to Duchasana, one of his brothers, "I have found a way to pay Bhima back. He is greedy and eats mountains of food. I shall drug his favourite dish so that he will fall into a stupor. Then we will tie him up and throw him into the river. It will be his turn to know what it is like to be under water."

Duchasana laughed gleefully at the thought of the huge Bhima struggling under water.

The Pandavas and Kauravas went to the river with their friends. A colourful medley of chariots, horses and elephants thronged the river-



Bhima began to strangle the snakes with his bare hands

side. The princes enjoyed themselves greatly, splashing and sporting in the water. The Pandavas excelled in diving and swimming. The Kauravas boxed and wrestled on the sands. Late in the day they sat down to a sumptuous feast. Bhima ate well not knowing his food was drugged.

That evening, when it was time to go, Bhima was nowhere to be found. The Pandavas thought he had already left, for so Duryodhana had told them.

"Has Bhima arrived?" asked Dharmaputra of Kunti when they reached home.

"No. Where is he? Isn't he with you?" she cried anxiously.

The drug had thrown Bhima into a deep sleep. He did not know that Duryodhana had had him bound and dropped into the river. Now it happened that there were snakes in that part of the river. They dug their sharp fangs into Bhima but could hardly penetrate his strong skin. It woke up Bhima however. He shook himself free and

began to strangle the snakes with his bare hands. Those remaining fled in terror to their king in the nether world.

"A boy sank into the water. We bit him but could not hurt him. What is more, he is so strong that he has killed some of us," they said.

The king of the snakes came out of the water to see for himself who this might be. When he heared that Bhima was the son of Pandu, an old friend of his, he was delighted.

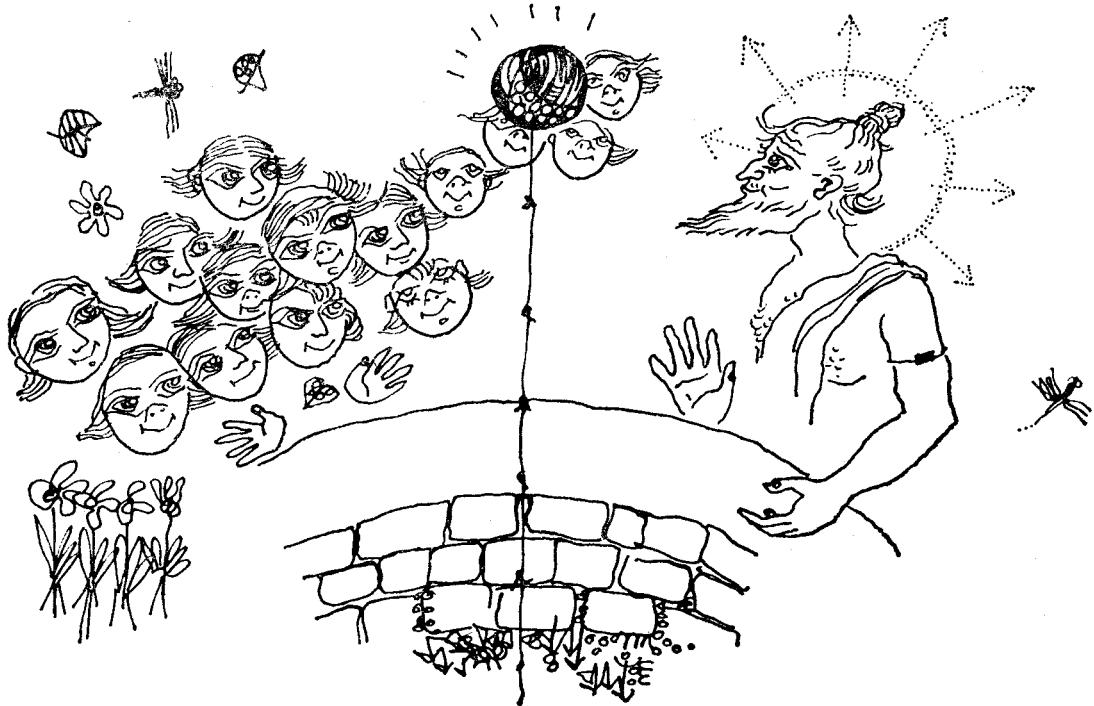
"I knew your father well and for his sake my snakes shall honour you," he said.

Then he ordered that the young man should be given deep draughts of life-giving nectar so that he might grow even stronger. Bhima emerged from the water feeling as strong as a thousand elephants. As he walked towards Hastinapura the earth shook beneath him.

When Kunti heard what had happened she was most unhappy and Dharmaputra bit his lip in vexation. "Please don't speak of this to anybody," he said to his brothers, but he secretly consulted Vidura.

Vidura was the wisest of the king's counsellors. He was learned above all men and because of his gentleness he was universally loved. He listened quietly.

"My prince," he said. "You did well to say nothing. Had you talked you would have angered Duryodhana even more and that would be dangerous. Keep your own counsel and be on your guard."



The boys looked at him in wonder.

CHAPTER 3

One day, the Pandavas and the Kauravas were playing near a well when their ball fell into it. The boys peeped in helplessly not knowing how to get it back.

A brahmin, who had been watching them with some amusement, said, "You are the princes of Kuru, aren't you? How is it that you do not know how to get a ball out of a well? Watch me do it."

He chanted a mantra. Then he threw a blade of grass into the well. It pierced the ball. He cast in more and more of them until the ball was held by a string of grass, by which he pulled it out.

The boys looked at him in wonder. "This is indeed marvellous. How do you do it?" they cried.

"Wait," said the brahmin and he threw his ring into the well. Then, taking up a bow, he aimed an arrow into the ring. The arrow came up with the ring.

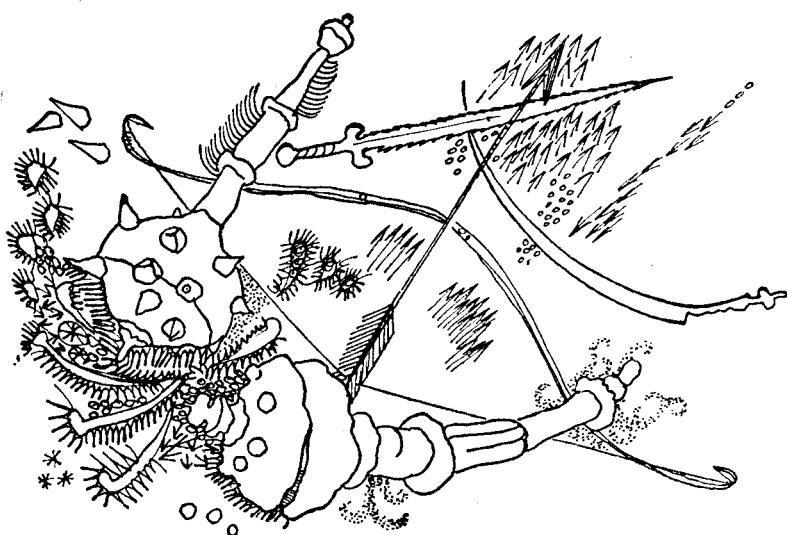
The boys broke into loud exclamations of delight. They ran in to tell their grandfather Bhisma of the astonishing feats of the stranger.

Bhisma at once guessed that this must be Drona the master archer. He hurried to welcome him and earnestly begged him to become tutor to the princes. Drona agreed. He was treated with great honour at the Kuru court. Bhisma gave him a noble mansion to live in and showered costly gifts on him.

Under the skilful guidance of Drona, the princes learnt the art of war. None could teach as Drona did, how to use the spear, the lance, the sword and the bow. He had a firm grip and a sure aim. Arrows flew from his bow with lightning speed, darting like tongues of fires. His fame spread throughout the world and sons of other kings came from far and wide to learn from him.

Duryodhana and Bhima took to the mace. The twins enjoyed the excitement of clashing swords. Arjuna became an archer. He

Duryodhana and Bhima took to the mace.



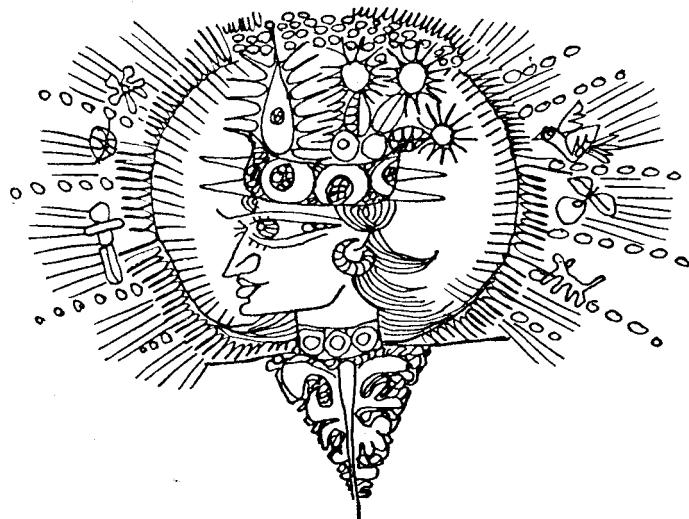
was the finest bowman of them all. No wonder he was Drona's favourite pupil. Even Aswathama, the master's son, could not beat him, although Drona tried to coach him in secret. To Arjuna, Aswathama and a few others, Drona imparted the secret of divine weapons. These could be evoked by the chanting of mantras and performed miraculous deeds.

At the end of a long period of teaching, Drona felt his pupils were ready for a display. Delighted with their progress, the king agreed to hold a tournament.

A splendid arena was built with seats, galleries and platforms. It was gaily decorated and brilliantly lit. At the appointed time, the king, Bhisma, Vidura and other nobles walked in. Gandhari, Kunti and the other ladies of the court watched from the gallery. The people of Hastinapura, eager to see the show, closed their shops and houses and thronged to the arena in large numbers. Excitement mounted, conches blew, trumpets sounded; the warriors entered.

Drona was the first to enter the arena with his son. Tall and stately, clad in white and smeared all over with sandal wood, he looked like the very tutor of the gods. The princes followed in order of age. They were in shining armour, carried swords at their sides and bows on their shoulders. On their hands were deer-skin gloves. First came Dharmaputra; after him each in turn displayed his skill. They rode, they shot and they wrestled. The crowd watched fascinated the flash of swords, the encounters with the mace and the swift flight of arrows. Bhima and Duryodhana had a single combat with the mace. They roared like lions and fell on each other with ferocious rage. So real was their anger that the people held their breath in fear.

Arjuna proudly walked to the centre. With careless ease he strung his bow and hit many targets. One was the hollow of a cow's horn hung on a rope that was swaying in the breeze. Arjuna sent twenty arrows into it. The crowd yelled with delight. Then, with the aid of sacred mantras, he evoked celestial weapons. At once the sky thundered with dark clouds and it began to rain. Miraculously in a moment it cleared and the sun shone in a blue sky. Fire next



At once the thousand-rayed sun god appeared.

broke out in crackling sparks and Arjuna put it out with water. People watched with breathless wonder and broke into wild applause.

A loud conch echoed at the gates. Somebody was challenging Arjuna. A hush fell on the assembly as a youth walked in, his face as bright as the sun. Who could he be? Only Kunti knew. It was Karna, the son she had borne the sun god before she married Pandu.

While yet a maiden in her father's house, Kunti had uttered one of the sacred mantras taught to her by the sage. At once the thousand-rayed sun god had appeared in all his glory.

"Dear Kunti, I have come in answer to your prayer to give you a son," he had said. In vain Kunti begged him to forgive her. She had chanted the prayers in fun to see what would happen. She was as yet unmarried.

"Alas! the words of this mantra, once uttered can never be recalled. Fear not. A boy will be born to you, ready-clad in ear rings and a coat of mail. Great will be his fame," said the sun god.

As soon as Karna was born, Kunti hid him in a basket and sent it floating down the river. A charioteer found the babe and

brought him up as his son. By the grace of the sun god, Karna found a wonderful teacher who taught him all that could be learnt of the art of war and made of him a great warrior. There he stood now, a challenge to the Kurus.

When Kunti saw the coat of mail and earrings, she trembled. She was torn between the happiness of seeing her son such a warrior and the guilt of her secret.

Karna said to Arjuna, "Let us measure our strength. Speak with arrows."

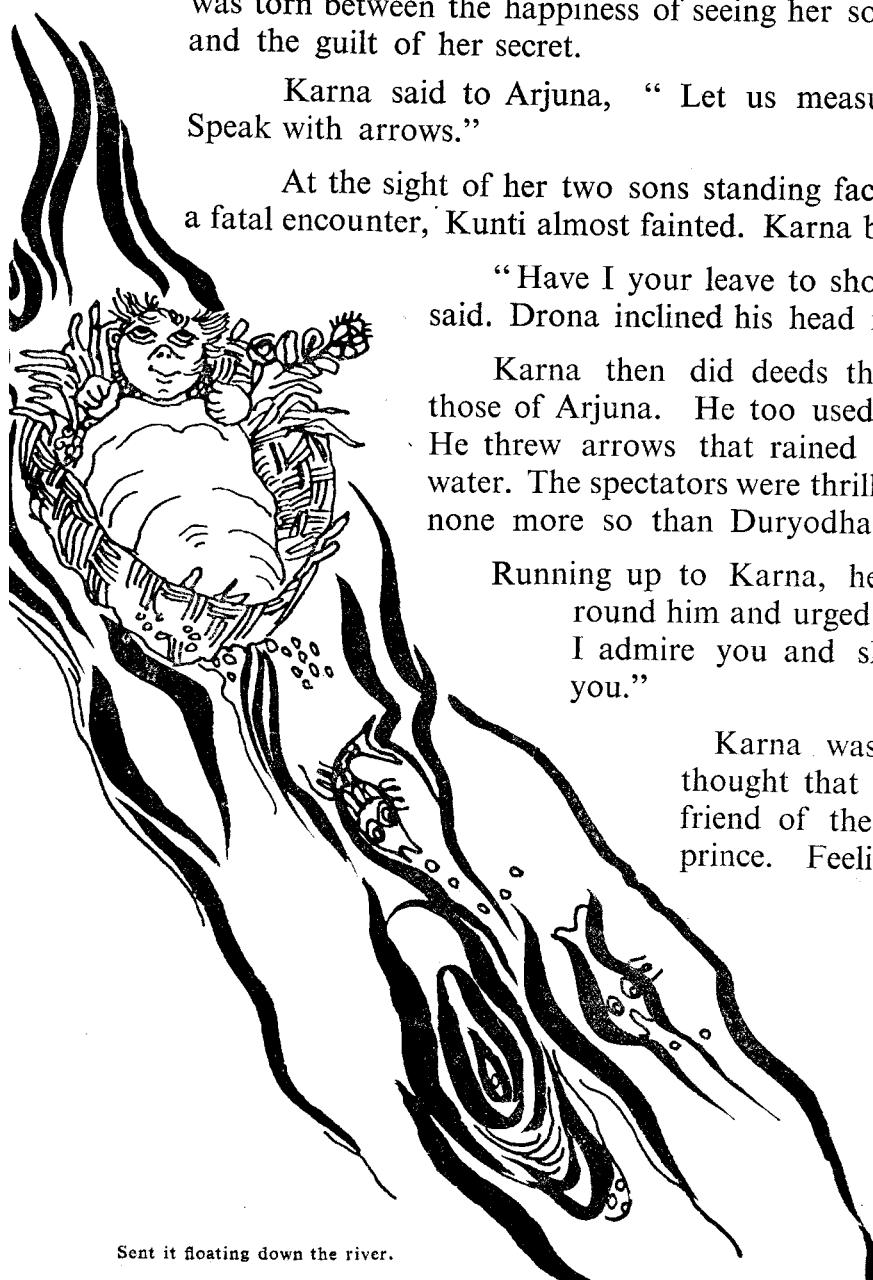
At the sight of her two sons standing face to face as if in a fatal encounter, Kunti almost fainted. Karna bowed to Drona.

"Have I your leave to show my skill?" he said. Drona inclined his head in permission.

Karna then did deeds that far outshone those of Arjuna. He too used divine weapons. He threw arrows that rained stone as well as water. The spectators were thrilled and delighted, none more so than Duryodhana.

Running up to Karna, he flung his arms round him and urged. "Be my friend. I admire you and shall always love you."

Karna was happy at the thought that he was now the friend of the great Kaurava prince. Feeling bolder than



Sent it floating down the river.

ever he called out to Arjuna, "Shall we show them what we can do? Karna. Those here may judge which of us is the better." Drona walked up to Karna. "You have challenged Arjuna. Princes like him can fight only those of equal rank. Tell me, stranger, who is your father?"

At that moment, Karna's foster father, the old charioteer, entered the arena. Karna did not hesitate. With a defiant smile on his face he walked up to his father and bowed to him.

"That's his father. We know who he is now," said Bhima mockingly. The crowd jeered. Kunti listened silently, with aching heart, for she had not the courage to tell her secret.

Duryodhana's eyes blazed with anger. He rushed to his father.

"Father, I will not see my friend insulted. I insist he be made king of Anga at once. He is a worthy hero," he said.

Without waiting for a reply, the impetuous prince gave orders for Karna to be crowned on the spot.

Anointed, with the sacred water of the Ganga glistening in his hair, Karna, the new king of Anga, faced Arjuna, in the midst of that vast assembly. The people of Hastinapura saw some wonderful feats of arms that day. The two heroes, vying with each other, did miracles with their bows and arrows. At the close of day, the crowd went away, some praising Arjuna and some Karna.

The pupils of Drona now longed to show their mettle in a real encounter. They begged Drona to set them a task.

Drona smiled. "Do you mean it?" he asked.

"Try us," cried the princes.

Drona looked thoughtful for a time.

"I wish to humble the proud king of Panchala. Bring him here to me, a prisoner. He must be made to eat the dust at my feet," he said.

The princes were surprised at his smouldering anger.

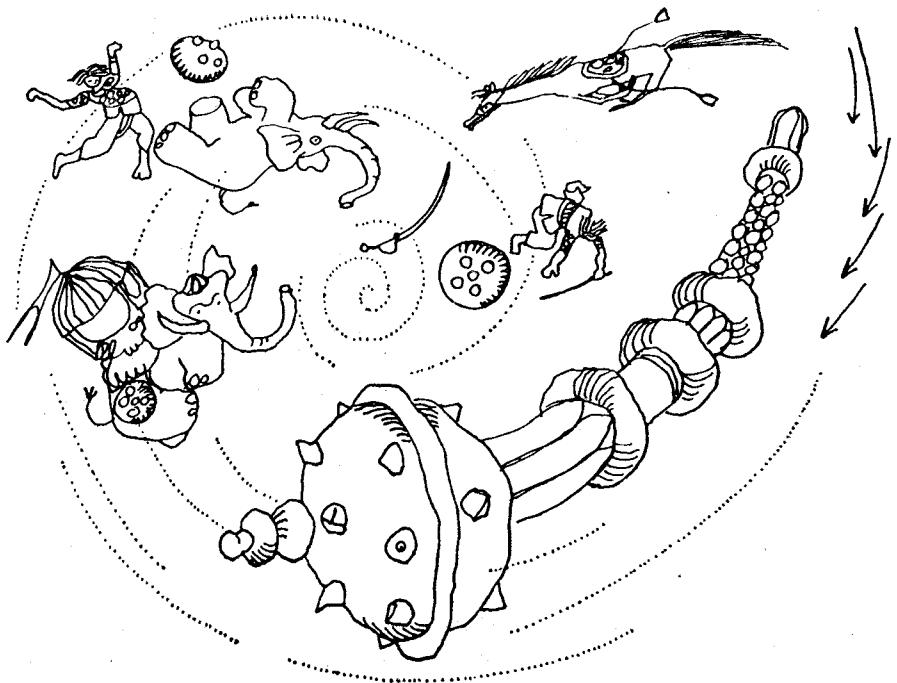
"Yes. You are surprised but you do not know how I was treated by King Drupada of Panchala. We were friends and went to the same school. We were so close to each other that Drupada even promised me half his kingdom. This was long before he came to the throne. Years later Drupada became king but I was still a poor brahmin. For the sake of Aswathama, whom I wished to bring up well, I swallowed my pride and went to Drupada for help. Do you know what he said to me? He laughed in my face and said I was a fool to believe the words of a raw youth. How could a king and a beggar be friends? He asked. My sons, do you realise now why I feel so bitter? Bring Drupada here, bound and a prisoner. No gift could be more pleasing to me," said Drona.

Moved by the story, the princes swore to avenge their master's honour.

Clad in shining armour, the Pandavas and Kauravas rode out to Panchala. A large force of cavalry and foot-soldiers followed them. Now that he had Karna with him, Duryodhana felt very strong. Without stopping to think, he entered the capital of Panchala with Karna and part of the forces. The Pandavas were left at the gates to keep guard.

King Drupada heard the clamour of Duryodhana driving through his streets and came out of his palace with a strong force of bowmen. Riding their chariots, he and his men poured out such a shower of arrows that the Kauravas were scattered. They were not expecting so fierce an attack. The king was a better soldier. The Kauravas were young and inexperienced. Duryodhana floundered and even the great Karna quailed. Caught in the narrow streets, unable to turn or manoeuvre, the Kauravas fled before King Drupada's arrows.

The Pandavas saw their chance. They drove the king and his men back into the city. Then Arjuna did what Drupada had been doing. He rode ahead in his chariot raining hundreds of arrows on all sides. The twins rode behind him covering his wheels. After them



Twirling his mace and pounding the king's men.

came Dharmaputra stringing his bow and scattering the enemy. Behind them all was Bhima. He rushed in headlong, twirling his mace and pounding the king's men, horses and elephants. King Drupada saw that the Pandavas were true warriors. Even in the thick of the fight he could not but admire Arjuna's shower of arrows. He now knew that his only hope of victory was to defeat Arjuna. With courage and determination, Drupada faced that hero, but he was no match for him. With a broad-headed arrow Arjuna broke the king's bow in two. He killed his steeds and wounded the charioteer.

King Drupada reeled and fell from his chariot. Joyfully, Arjuna sprang down and ran to Drupada. He bound him and took him to Drona who had been watching the fight from a distance.

Flushed with triumph, Arjuna forced Drupada to his knees at the master's feet.

" You said kings and beggars could not be friends. I shall take half your kingdom and become your equal. Now we could be friends, couldn't we? " said Drona. He then commanded Arjuna to set the king free. Drupada retired to his part of the kingdom. Filled with shame and angry grief, he secretly swore vengeance. He prayed long and performed sacrifices to the gods so that they might grant him a son to kill Drona and a daughter to marry the valorous Arjuna. The gods heard his plea and in due course granted his request. One day while the king was at prayer, there rose from the sacrificial fires two lovely children, a girl and a boy. The son, Draupada, was destined to kill Drona in the great war. The daughter, Draupadi, was to be won as a bride by Arjuna whom king Drupada had admired so much.

CHAPTER 4

"Do you know what people are saying in the streets of the city, Father?" asked Duryodhana of the king.

The old king turned his sightless eyes on him.

"No, what do they say, my son?"

"They praise the Pandavas, their prowess and their high character."

"Is that all?"

"Is it not enough to drive one crazy? Everywhere, in the streets and the market-places, I hear Arjuna extolled to the skies. King Drupada has been humbled. The Kurus have grown in wealth and power because of the Pandavas, they say."

"It is indeed so. The Pandavas have conquered where even the great Pandu had failed."

"I see. Perhaps you would like to crown Dharmaputra king here and now."

"What are you saying? Who said anything about that?

"The people do. Pandu was made king because you were born blind. It seems but natural, they say, that his son should now rule as king. They adore Dharmaputra and so do you. Why shouldn't he be king? Who cares what happens to me?"

The old king sighed. "What can I do? The Pandavas are my brother's children and have a right here."

"Then seat him on the throne and be happy. I shall go away to the forest," said Duryodhana, his voice thick with anger.

The king sat in troubled thought. "What must I do?" he asked heavily.

"Send them away, somewhere far off, where the people of Hastinapura cannot see them," said Duryodhana.

"That is right. Please send them away," echoed Karna.

He and Duchasana were with them in the king's private chamber.

"Why not send them to Varanavata? It is at the other end of the kingdom. There is a magnificent temple, and the festival next week will provide a good reason," said Duchasana.

"The Pandavas have been good to the people. If I banish them, the citizens will blame me," said the king.

"Did I say banish them? Send them away for some time until I win over the people to my side with gifts and kind words. Once I establish myself with them and you declare me your heir, they can return."

The blind king wavered. "The people will slay us if we harm them," he said.

"What harm could come to them at Varanavata?" said Duryodhana.

The next day, the Kauravas tried to persuade their cousins to visit Varanavata by describing it in glowing terms.

"Cousin, do go and see this beautiful town," said Duryodhana.

"The temple there is a marvel and the nearby jungle is full of game," said Duchasana.

"Yes, why don't you go and enjoy yourselves?" urged the blind king.

Dharmaputra at once sensed that something was afoot but he said nothing. It was decided that the Pandavas were to attend the festival at Varanavata temple.

"Refuse to go. They cannot force us," said Bhima hotly when they were alone.

"It is clear they want to get rid of us," said Arjuna.

"We have no friends and no wealth. There is nobody to speak for us. Even grandfather will hesitate, for he can give no good reason why we should not go. We are in no position to protest. Go we

must, but once there let us bide our time and look out for our chance," said Dharmaputra.

The others saw he was right and so they prepared for the journey. Their mother Kunti went with them.

Bhismra speeded them away with his blessings. "You have the favour of the gods. No harm can come to you," he said. All the same he felt sad for he knew which way the wind was blowing.

Vidura was more direct. When the Pandavas took leave of him, he warned Dharmaputra of danger in words which only he could understand. The brothers were left in no doubt that they had to be on their guard.

The Pandavas soon endeared themselves to the citizens of Varanavata by visiting them in their homes and showing real concern for their health and well-being. They also honoured the brahmins who had collected there in large numbers for the temple festival. Before long, they became very popular with high and low.

A few days later, a friend of Duryodhana called on the Pandavas.

"I have built a special palace for you by order of the king. Please come and live in it," he said.

As soon as Dharmaputra entered the new house, he felt something was wrong. "I smell lac and wax on the walls. Vidura warned us of danger. Perhaps, Duryodhana's friend hopes to burn us with the house when we are asleep," he said.

"Shall we return to where we were or else leave the town?" asked Bhima.

"No. That would not help us. I suspect that danger will follow us wherever we go. It is better to stay here but watch carefully," said Dharmaputra.

"We should have a plan," said Arjuna.

"Yes. We should think of a way of escape if we are caught by the fire," said the eldest Pandava.

Sometime later a miner arrived at the palace. He said he had been sent by Vidura to help them. It struck Dharmaputra that with his aid they could dig a passage under the floor of the palace which would lead to the forest outside the town. If fire broke out they could escape through the secret tunnel. From then on, the Pandavas worked at night, digging the passage. During the day they went out pretending to hunt but really to reconnoitre the countryside around.

Duryodhana's friend who lived with them suspected nothing. The Pandavas looked happy and behaved as if they hadn't a care in the world. One night Dharmaputra felt he could bear the suspense no more.

"Why not set fire to the house ourselves? We can leave Duryodhana's friend to burn in it while we escape," he said.

Nothing could have pleased Bhima more. It was he who set fire to the palace at dead of night and helped his mother and brothers down the secret passage.

Hearing the crackling noise of the big fire, the people of the town ran out to see what had happened. What was their sorrow to see the palace of the Pandavas burning to cinders! Sure that the princes had



The crackling noise of the big fire.

been burnt to death, they lamented loudly. They did not know that only Duryodhana's friend had been hoist with his own petard.

When the news reached Hastinapura, the capital was sunk in gloom. The old king wept. The Kauravas seemed inconsolable. Everyone at court looked sorrowful except Vidura. The others wondered at his calm, not knowing that he had helped them to escape. Seeing Bhismā sadly stricken with grief, Vidura let him into the secret.

Far away near Varanavata the Pandavas bravely trudged through the forest with their mother.

"I cannot help thinking of king Pandu, of how we once lived and our present plight," said Kunti.

"We should have refused to leave Hastinapura or openly accused Duryodhana when we discovered the secret of the lac house," said Bhima.

"That would have been foolish. Duryodhana would have got more angry and denied the charge. We have no powerful friends to help us and cannot afford to quarrel with him," said Dharmaputra.

They walked on in silence. All save one tired very soon. He, the broad and sturdy Bhima, bore them on his back and shoulders. Undaunted, he strode through the jungle like a mighty elephant. They could not but suffer, travelling as they did through dense forest. At last, after many days, they reached the city of Ekachakrapura.

Dharmaputra decided to settle there quietly for a while.

"Let Duryodhana imagine we have been destroyed. Meanwhile we shall stay here in disguise and plan our next move," he said. So the Pandavas bided their time in the city, disguised in deerskin garments. Every day they begged for alms as poor brahmins do. Each day when they returned, Kunti would divide what they brought into two parts. She gave Bhima one part, for he was huge in build and needed a lot of food. The others shared the rest. The brahmins of the city found the Pandavas kind, helpful and friendly. They soon grew fond of the handsome strangers. One of them even offered to share his house with them and the Pandavas lived there in peace.



The princess is exceedingly lovely.

CHAPTER 5

Bhima and Arjuna, however, fretted often. Used to a life of hunting and warfare, they found begging dull work and grew restless.

"There is to be a great festival at Panchala very soon. King Drupada is performing a sacrifice and has invited all the brahmins of the land to attend it. At the end of the sacrifice the king's daughter, the beautiful Draupadi, is to choose her husband. The king has set a task for her suitors. Those who wish for the hand of the princess must try to accomplish it," said a travelling brahmin who was visiting the Pandavas. "Why don't you come with me? I am going there to watch the contest. It is sure to be thrilling, for all the famous heroes in the land will be there," he said.

"It would be even more thrilling to take part in it," murmured Arjuna, casting a glance at Dharmaputra.

"The princess is exceedingly lovely. Large are her eyes and fish shaped. Her hair is black and glistening. She is a daughter of the gods. You must have heard of how she and her brother appeared in the sacred fire as grown children. The man who wins her would be fortunate indeed," said the traveller.

"He would," said Arjuna under his breath.

Daily the Pandavas grew more restless. Wise Kunti, guessing that her sons were longing to go to Drupada's festival suggested, "Why not go to the Panchala sacrifice? It is not too far from here." The Pandavas agreed most eagerly and set forth at once. Kunti smiled. It seemed to her that all five of them were already in love with Draupadi.

The brothers were still in disguise and when they arrived at the capital of Panchala, they lodged quietly in a potter's hut.

Now Drupada did not believe that the Pandavas were burnt to death at the lac palace. He felt certain they had escaped and were in hiding. He therefore set a task for Draupadi's suitors which he knew Arjuna alone could achieve. He expected that prince to come out of hiding and fulfil Drupada's long cherished dream.

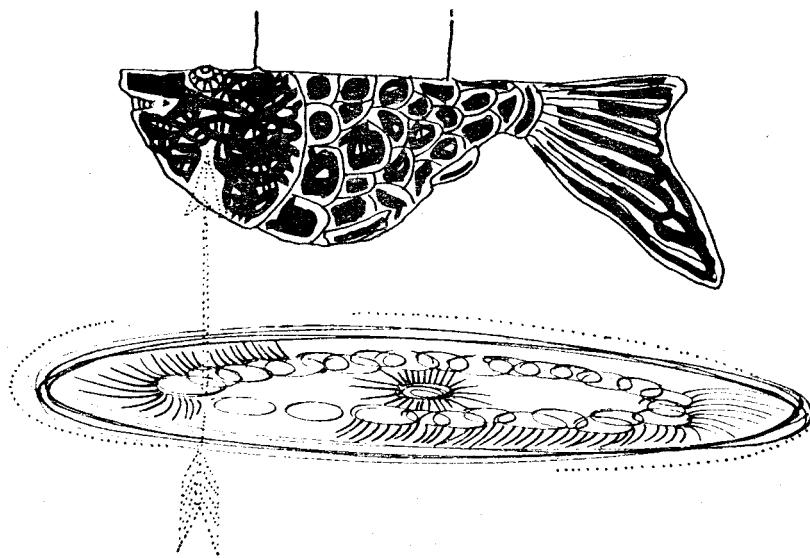
On hearing of the contest and the prize it carried, princes from far and near came to Panchala. King Drupada's amphitheatre, decorated in rich colours, glittered with their coats of mail. The floors were covered with carpets and costly seats were set for the exalted guests. The king arranged a magnificent programme of sports and pageant to entertain the visitors.

The contest took place on the last day. Drums sounded, trumpets blew. Robed in silk and adorned with flowers, the princess entered the assembly. Everyone gazed in rapture at her lotus face. She carried a garland which she would place round the neck of the victorious suitor. Draupada, her brother, was with her.

"This is my sister, Draupadi, the gift of the gods to my father, king Drupada of Panchala. Here is a bow and there high up in the air is a target above a whirling disc. He who is able to hit the target with five arrows one after another shall win the bride," he said. Then he turned to his sister and related to her the illustrious names of her suitors. Duryodhana, Karna and Aswathama were there. So too was Krishna, king of Dwaraka.

Krishna was said to be of divine origin, the very spirit of Vishnu come down to earth as saviour of mankind. He was related to the

Pandavas and dearly loved by them. He was their friend and helped them whenever they were in trouble, for Krishna was born to help those in need. Many were the tales told of the deeds he did and the miracles he performed to succour those who loved him. He was wise in counsel too and a shrewd statesman. The Pandavas valued his advice most highly and in the end, when war seemed inevitable, it was to him they turned for counsel.



High up in the air is a target above a whirling disc.

The contest began. Each of the kings rose, proud and sure, thinking himself the ablest. None of them could even lift the bow. King after king tried and failed. Some staggered to the ground and others were flung off in the effort. Most of them had to withdraw in shame and confusion. Karna alone felt sure of success. His eyes shone bright with hope and he almost sprang from his seat. Suddenly he remembered and sank back. If he won he would have to speak of his birth. It had been revealed to Karna that his true father was the sun god but if he betrayed Kunti's secret she would be unhappy. On the other hand if he kept silent king Drupada would think he was the son of a charioteer and refuse him his daughter. He looked at the lovely Draupadi and sighed. She was not for him. "I cannot put Queen

Kunti to shame. I must suffer for her sin," he said and sadly withdrew.

The Pandavas were sitting among the brahmins. Arjuna came forward and asked whether he could compete.

"Why not? Anybody who succeeds wins my sister, brahmin or noble," said Draupada.

Arjuna walked up to the bow. As he went past people marvelled at his springy gait and his taut, well-muscled body. He took up the bow and strung it with ease. Drawing it he sent five swift arrows into the target. The audience thundered their applause. Cries of joy filled the amphitheatre. Mingled with it were angry protests from the assembled kings that a brahmin had been given the chance and won. They snatched up their weapons, spoiling for a fight.

Meanwhile the princess shyly approaching Arjuna wound the garland round his neck. Blushing, she took hold of his garment as if to say, "I am ready to follow you to the ends of earth." The kings tried to stop her and Drupada looked alarmed. Krishna intervened for he had recognised the Pandavas in spite of their disguise. Without revealing their secret he soothed the ruffled tempers of the visiting kings with his soft speech and divine smile. Swords were sheathed and the angry murmurs died down.

The Pandavas quickly led Draupadi to the potter's hut.

"Mother, open the door. We have brought you a rare treat," said Dharmaputra from without.

"Share it amongst yourselves, my sons," said Kunti from within. Then she opened the door. What was her surprise and joy when she found Draupadi there.

"So Arjuna won the prize. You must share it all the same," she said, smiling. Draupadi threw a bashful glance at her but the brothers turned away their faces to hide their joy. How had their mother known that all five of them loved Draupadi!

Dharmaputra turned to Arjuna. "She is yours. You won her and have a right to her," he said.

By this time, Arjuna too knew that all his brothers were as much in love with Draupadi as himself. "Mother is right. Let us all wed her," he said.

There was great happiness in the hearts of the other four when they heard him.

Meanwhile, king Drupada in his palace was puzzled. He had imagined that none but Arjuna could have accomplished the feat. How had the brahmin boy done it? Just then Draupada rushed in.

"Father, I followed those brahmins home and overheard their talk from outside the window of their hut. They are the Pandavas and the youth who aimed at our target was none other than Arjuna. All along I suspected it and therefore even allowed him to compete although he was sitting amongst the brahmins. Now I am sure of it," he cried.

The king could not speak for joy. At last his wish had come true. He sent for the Pandavas and embraced them warmly.

"I am the happiest of men. Let us celebrate Draupadi's wedding with Arjuna without delay," he said.

"My mother wishes that all five of us marry her," said Dharmaputra with a shy smile.

"How is that possible? I have never heard of such a thing," cried the king.

"My mother commands it," Dharmaputra said firmly.

The king looked doubtful. The sages who had gathered there for the sacrifice advised him to agree.

"It is true that this is against the usual custom, but Draupadi may do so. Remember she is of divine origin and gifted to you by the gods so that she may marry the Pandavas," they said.

"Either we all wed her or we go," said Arjuna.

The king saw no way out but to agree.

Draupadi's wedding to the Pandavas was celebrated with great joy. Dressed in golden robes and perfumed with sandalwood, the handsome Pandavas, each in turn, led Draupadi round the sacred fire. Agni, the god of fire, was the divine witness to the ceremony.

The king gave many costly presents to the bride and bridegrooms, and begged the Pandavas and Kunti to make their home with him. The brothers who, until then, had been homeless beggars, suddenly found themselves rich, with a beautiful wife and a powerful ally. King Drupada swore to help them recover their birthright.

CHAPTER 6

"I bring you good news, King Dhritarashtra. May your dynasty rule forever in glory," said Vidura.

"I know what it is. Duryodhana has won Draupadi. Isn't it so?" asked the blind king, joyfully.

"No. It was Arjuna who won the prize. The Pandavas are alive. They escaped the fire and now Draupadi is the wife of all five."

The king's face fell but he quickly hid his disappointment and said, "That makes no difference. I am equally happy. The Pandavas are my brother's sons and I rejoice at their good fortune."

Vidura smiled. He knew the king's true feelings.

"May you always think so," he said aloud.

After Vidura had gone, the king sat thinking moodily of how Fortune always favoured the Pandavas.

"Father, have you heard the news?" Duryodhana's voice rang out in the stillness.

"Yes, my son."

"They have everything they could desire," said Karna, bursting with envy.

"Yes, wife, wealth and a powerful ally," said Duryodhana. "At least now, do something, Father."

"What can I do?" said the king hopelessly.

Duryodhana spoke out what was simmering in his mind.

"If we are clever we could make them fall out with each other. After all it is not easy for five brothers to share a wife."

Karna scorned the idea.

"Let us face them in battle like good soldiers. The Pandavas love each other and you can never trick them into a quarrel. It is

foolish to think of it. Fight them now before they become too strong. We shall outnumber them. They will fly before us," he said.

"That is easier said than done. Remember the Pandavas can do deeds brighter than the sun," said the king.

White with anger, Karna cried, "Have you not heard of my deeds? At the tournament, Arjuna was staggered by my arrows."

The old king was in a torment of spirit. He would have liked to agree with Karna but dared not. "We must consult Bhisma before we decide anything," he said weakly.

Drona and Vidura were with the king when he asked Bhisma for advice. "It is true that you are the eldest Kuru and that Duryodhana is your heir. Yet Pandu was once king of the Kuru land and his sons may think they have some rights. I know the Pandavas would never stake their claim by force but if Duryodhana provokes them they will fight. I know too that Duryodhana wants everything for himself and hopes to deprive the Pandavas by some means or other. I fear there may be trouble. It is therefore better to give the Pandavas a part of the kingdom and send them away," he said.

"A part of the kingdom? Is it wise to split the Kuru land?" said the king, turning to Vidura.

"Yes, it is wiser to do as Bhisma says rather than have war and bloodshed between cousins," said Vidura.

"Good advice. Send Vidura to king Drupada and let him tell the king of Panchala how delighted you are at this new bond that would strengthen your friendship. Invite the Pandavas to return and offer them a part of the kingdom," said Drona.

The other two nodded agreement. The king dared not ignore Bhisma's wise counsel. Reluctantly, he sent Vidura to Panchala with presents for the new bride. Vidura went to meet the Pandavas with a happy heart. Once more the five brothers entered the capital of the Kuru kingdom, this time with Draupadi. The townsfolk joyfully thronged to the gates to receive them.

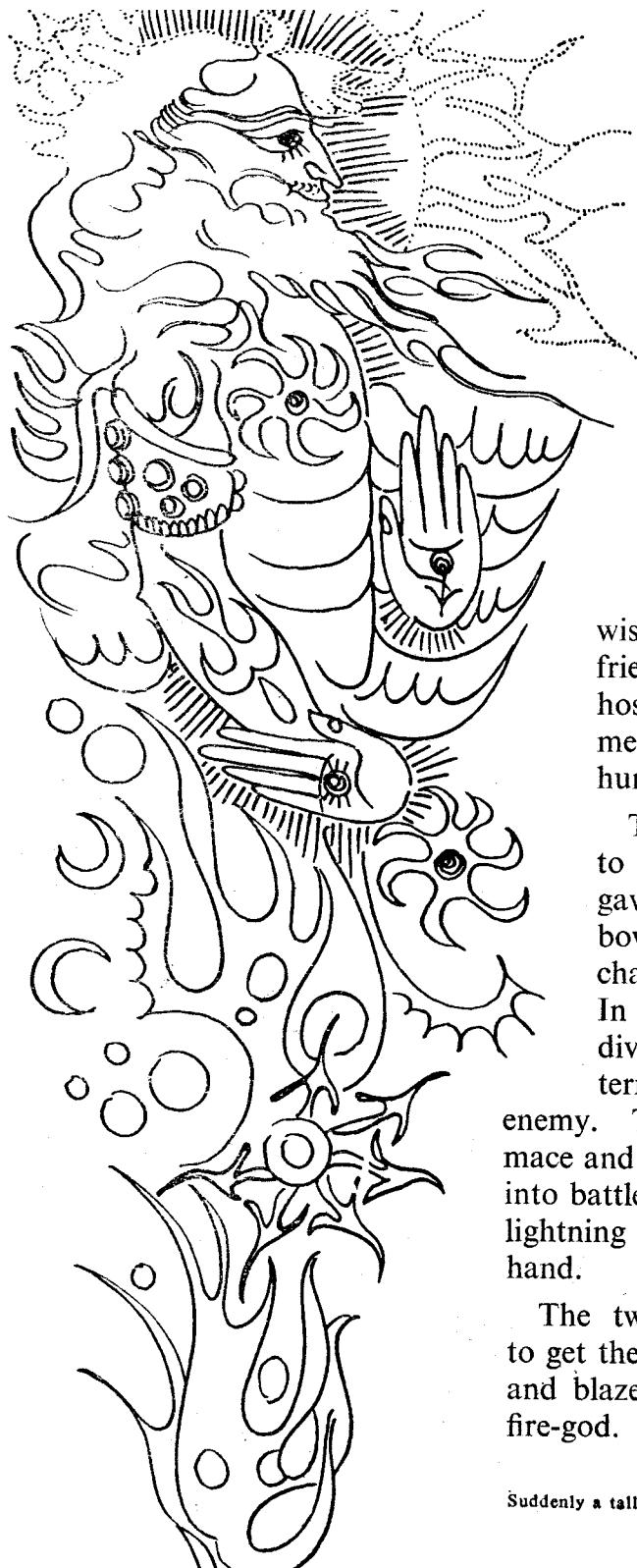
Dharmaputra bowed low before the blind king. His uncle embraced him.

"I rejoice to hear of Arjuna's wonderful feat. May the illustrious Kurus live for ever. I am giving you a part of the kingdom so that you and Duryodhana may both live in happiness. Go to Khandavaprastha and build a capital for yourselves there. Duryodhana will reign here after me," he said.

Dharmaputra knew that Khandavaprastha was no more than a wasteland, but he quietly accepted what was given to him and left for his part of the kingdom with Draupadi, Kunti and his brothers. He knew he had no choice unless he wished to start a war.

He was crowned king of the new kingdom as the eldest of the Pandavas and the gods smiled on them. They cleared the jungle and soon a great city rose towards the skies. It had strong fortress walls, wide moats and high gateways. White mansions, looking like clouds, floated in the silver sky. Lotus bloomed in the lakes and the gardens were full of flowering trees. The desert had now become a land of beauty, which they named Indraprastha or the city of Indra. Learned brahmins and rich merchants flocked there. The city flourished and soon became a centre of wealth and culture. Day by day the Pandavas increased in wealth, fame and happiness. They each had a son by Draupadi. Tall, longarmed and broad-chested, these sons grew up to be champions like their fathers. Bhima and Arjuna also married other wives as princes very often did in those days. One of Arjuna's wives was Subhadra, sister of Krishna. By her he had a son called Abhimanyu who was handsome beyond measure. He was highspirited, fearless and almost as good an archer as his father. Arjuna taught all the princes the use of arms and the Pandavas watched with joy their sons growing up to be heroes.

Krishna came often to Indraprastha. He and Arjuna were such close friends that their hearts seemed to beat in unison. One summer day, Krishna and Arjuna went to the river Yamuna for a day of sports with their friends. The two wandered off together while the others were amusing themselves on the river bank. They came near the jungle



of Khandavaprastha. Suddenly a tall man with a golden beard came up to them. His face was shining like molten liquid.

"I am Agni, the god of fire," he said. "I am hungry and would like to devour this forest but every time I try to destroy it, Indra, the god of rain thwarts me by sending down rainstorms. He wishes to protect his demon friend who lives there with his hosts. Arjuna, Krishna, help me find my food. I am hungry."

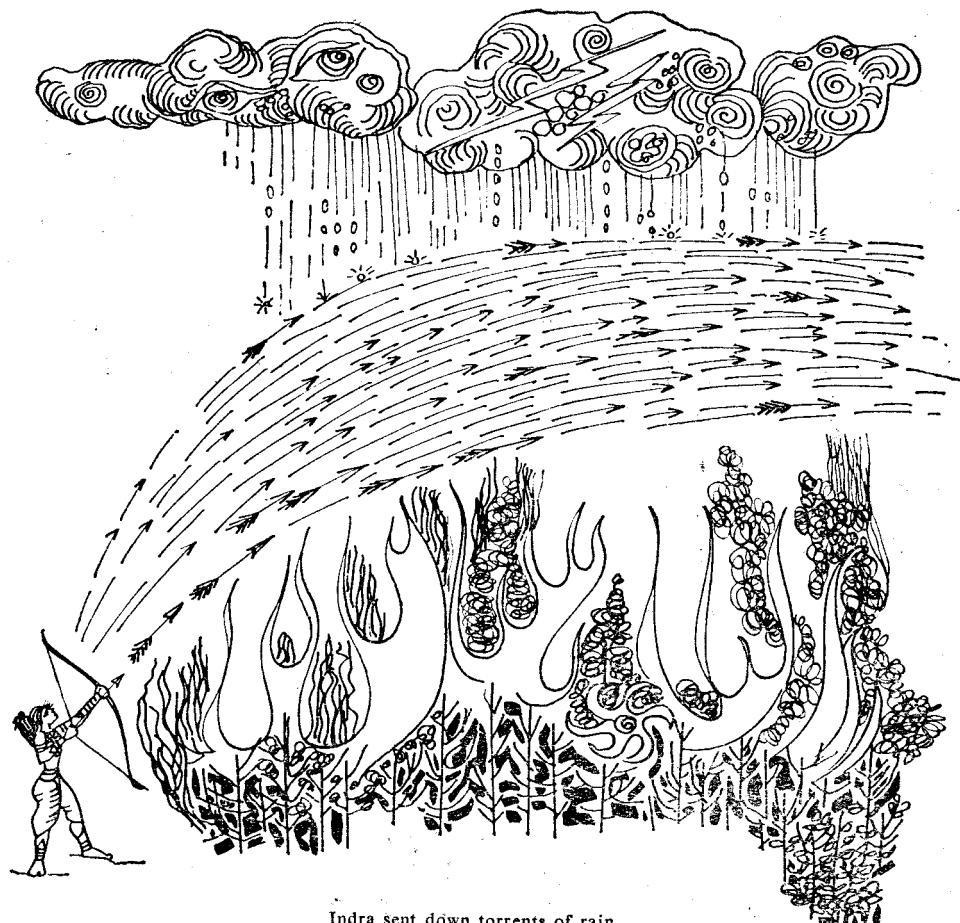
The two heroes promised to help. Delighted, Agni, gave Arjuna a wonderful bow called Gandiva and a chariot with an ape banner. In battle, the sight of this divine banner would strike terror into the hearts of the enemy. To Krishna, Agni gave a mace and a disc which, when hurled into battle, would cut off heads with lightning speed and return to his hand.

The two friends were overjoyed to get these divine weapons. "Roar and blaze away," they cried to the fire-god.

Suddenly a tall man with a golden beard came up to them.

A great fire broke out and destroyed the forest of Khandavaprastha. Krishna and Arjuna stood one at each end of the forest so that no demon could escape them. Agni devoured the dry crackling shrubs with fiery tongues. Seeing his demon friends being destroyed, Indra sent down torrents of rain. Arjuna cleverly stopped them with a network of arrows, chanting the mantras taught to him by Drona. The demons ran out in fright and were slain by Krishna's disc.

"Help, Arjuna, save me, be merciful. Agni is after me and Krishna's disc is over my head," cried a frightened voice. Arjuna ran to the rescue, for heroes always forgive those who surrender and ask for



Indra sent down torrents of rain.

succour. Krishna withdrew his disc. It was Maya, the demon builder of palaces. "You have saved my life today, Arjuna. From now on I am at your service. Command and I shall obey," he said.

Maya built a most wonderful palace for the Pandavas at Indraprastha. Entering it, one seemed to be in a dream-world of golden columns, marble stairways and frescoed walls. Within were lotus pools with glazed steps and water so clear that one could see the jewelled floors. In the evening a cool breeze wafted in, carrying the fragrance of scented flowers. Here the Pandavas spent many happy hours with their queen and children.

Kings and nobles visited Dharmaputra. Sages gathered at Indraprashta to discuss the sacred scriptures. The whole world came to respect the Pandava king.

"Great king, your friends believe you are worthy to rule the world. The time has come when you should perform the coronation sacrifice and assume the title of emperor," they said to Dharmaputra with one voice.

The king mused over these words. Then he turned to Krishna. "Should I really perform this sacrifice? Am I good enough to undertake such a great task?" he asked.

"Only a king who is acknowledged as supreme by all the rest could perform this sacrifice. With Bhima's strength and Arjuna's prowess you have already won over all of them. Jarasanda alone remains to be subdued. He is powerful and unyielding. He will not submit and unless he too bends his knees to you, you cannot conduct the coronation sacrifice," said Krishna.

"Krishna is wisdom. I am strength and Arjuna is glory. Send us against Jarasanda and we shall return victorious," said Bhima.

Dharmaputra wavered. "How can I bear to send all three of you on such a mission? No king who has dared to face Jarasanda has so far returned alive. Krishna is my mind and you two are my very eyes. How can I risk your lives?" said he in a troubled voice.

Krishna eventually persuaded him to let them go and the three heroes set out for the kingdom of Jarasanda.

"Jarasanda is valorous but also proud. He will not refuse a challenge. Let us invite him to single combat," said Krishna.

They entered Jarasanda's city and seeking out the king announced themselves. "We have come before you unarmed. Fight one of us in single combat," they said.

Jarasanda looked contemptuously at Krishna. "Your foster father is a cowherd. I do not fight with milkmen. Arjuna is but a boy yet. I shall fight Bhima. He is a worthy foe," he said.

"Let us begin," said Bhima eagerly and the two began to wrestle with bare hands.

It was a thrilling fight. Arjuna and Krishna watched with tense admiration. Roaring like thunder clouds they rushed at each other and were locked in a grim clasp. They were like mad elephants tussling together. Bhima seized Jarasanda by the neck and threw him on the floor. In a trice the king was up and taking Bhima round the waist hurled him on the ground. Thus they fought on for hours and hours, neither tiring nor pausing. So fierce was the combat and so great was the noise they made that the citizens came out in large crowds to watch the fight. At last Jarasanda grew tired. Bhima gave him a powerful blow on the chest and as the king reeled, threw him on the ground. Before he could recover and get up, the son of Pandu sprang on his back and pressing his knee on his spine, tore his two legs apart.

The death of Jarasanda made the rest of the conquest easy. Without much fight, the neighbouring kings accepted Dharmaputra as their leader and paid him tribute.

Indraprastha hummed with activity. King Dharmaputra was about to perform the coronation sacrifice ! Rich nobles and princes filled the royal coffers. Sages laid out the sacred altars and priests chanted Vedic mantras. From all over the world brahmins, sages, kings and nobles crowded the sacred pavilion. Drona, Bhism,

Aswathama, Duryodhana and others arrived. So did the king of Panchala and his sons.

To each of them Dharmaputra set a task. Duchasana served food to the brahmins. Drona looked after the gold and precious stones. Karna made gifts and Duryodhana received the tributes brought by the kings. Krishna honoured the brahmin guests by ceremonial rites.

The great sacrifice had six fires. Libations were poured into them by sages well versed in Vedic ritual. The king gave away cattle, jewels and gold in enormous quantities. All were full of praise for the Pandavas, their courtesy and their bounty. The five brothers basked in the lustre of their glory. After the sacrifice was over the guests took leave one by one until at last only Duryodhana and his brothers remained.

At leisure, Duryodhana walked round Maya's famous palace. His uncle, Sakuni, was with him. He looked at the jewelled floors, the frescoed walls and the golden ceiling. The pools were crowded with lotus blossoms. The air was full of their perfume. The prince stared at them, his eyes bright with envious tears.

"Uncle, this is not a palace. It is a fantasy," he said and the words stuck in his throat. Then imagining it to be the mosaic floor, he walked into a pool. Such was the magic of Maya's touch. Draupadi and Bhima who were there saw the mishap and laughed aloud. Duryodhana grew crimson with vexation.

"One day I shall get even with you," he swore under his breath and shook his fists at them. He looked so funny, in all his finery, picking himself out of the water that Draupadi laughed the more.

Duryodhana went home angry, sullen and simmering with thoughts of revenge.



Let me see.....that seems to be the only way.

CHAPTER 7

"Duryodhana, you sleep badly these days and eat very little. What is the matter, my boy," said Sakuni.

"How can I feel well, Uncle? My heart burns every time I think of all the wealth and power the Pandavas enjoy," said Duryodhana.

"You too have great wealth. You are heir to the Kuru throne and you have good friends. Why should you worry about the Pandavas?"

"How can I sleep? When I close my eyes I see the dazzling brightness of all the gold that was poured into Dharmaputra's coffers. Do you know how my arms ached with receiving the tributes brought by the kings?"

"Do stop brooding. If you wish, we too could have a grand sacrifice here."

Duryodhana hardly heard him. "Never was there anything as wonderful as that magic palace of Maya's. Did you notice how Draupádi laughed when I slipped and fell? She shall pay for it," he muttered.

Sakuni looked at his nephew with concern. "Come, forget your cousins. Why! You have every thing a man could want."

"I feel sick and shall never be well as long as the Pandavas live in such splendour. In my dreams I am tormented by visions of Dharmaputra seated on the throne in Maya's palace looking like the king of heaven. I tell you I shall poison myself and die if you do not help me to get rid of them," said Duryodhana.

Sakuni sat long in thoughtful silence. "The Pandavas are mighty heroes and cannot be easily wiped out. Let me see. . . . yes. . . . that seems to be the only way."

"What is it, Uncle? Have you thought of something? Tell me," said Duryodhana.

"Grave and serious as he is, Dharmaputra is fond of gambling. If only you could persuade him to play dice with me it would be easy, if need be, to cheat him, for he is poor at the game. Invite him and I promise you he shall leave Hastinapura a beggar," said Sakuni.

Duryodhana sprang to his feet in joy. His gloom vanished and he embraced his uncle. "You have thought of the very thing to humble these proud cousins of mine," he said.

Then he ran to seek his father. "Father, let me invite the Pandavas here for a game of dice," he said.

"Dice? Gambling is not for kings!" said the old king.

"Father, please allow us to play," begged the son.

The old king guessed the reason and was afraid to agree. "Vidura and Bhisma would counsel against it," he said, hesitatingly.

Duryodhana exploded with rage. "You would not stop me from having my wish if you could have seen the lustre that surrounds

the Pandavas. Oh, father, if God gives you eyes for even a minute, spend it in looking at the dream-world Maya has created for them," he said.

The king still demurred.

"Father, if you don't agree, I swear to you I shall kill myself," said Duryodhana.

The old king could resist him no longer. He sent for Vidura and commanded him to go and invite the Pandavas to Hastinapura for a game of dice.

"Be warned, my monarch, do not allow this game. It will lead to disaster and the Kurus will ruin each other," said the wise minister.

"Disaster? What could happen when Bhism and Drona, you and I are all here to protect the Kurus?"

"Ask Bhism whether kings should gamble," Vidura said again.

"Go and do as I command" replied the king. Vidura had to go.

When he heard of the invitation, Dharmaputra looked disturbed. "I cannot refuse an invitation. I shall have to go. Who else besides Duryodhana will be playing ?" he asked.

"Sakuni," said Vidura shortly.

"I see. He is noted for his cunning."

"Refuse to play. It is wrong for kings to gamble. Our scriptures advise against it," said Vidura.

Dharmaputra looked embarrassed. "How can I refuse a challenge? No king worthy of his name can," he said.

Vidura understood. Dharmaputra loved dice and he wanted to play. Nothing would stop him. Sadly he turned away.

Once again the Pandavas entered the fair city of Hastinapura. Kunti, Draupadi, Subhadra, Arjuna's other wife and all their sons were with them.

King Dhritarashtra greeted them with a great show of affection. The Kauravas too welcomed them warmly and took them to the hall of games which they had specially built for the occasion. It was crowded with nobles and princes. Bhism, Drona, Vidura, Aswathama, Karna and others were all there. Even the blind king graced the occasion. The pieces for the game had been set out and when Sakuni saw this, he invited Dharmaputra to play.

"Kings use their wealth to better the world. Should we throw it away thus?" said Dharmaputra.

"Are you afraid of losing?" asked Sakuni, tauntingly.

Dharmaputra flushed. "I never refuse a challenge. Let us play. Who plays with me first?" he said.

"Uncle shall play for me. I shall give him all the wealth he needs for stakes," said Duryodhana.

"Is that usual?" asked Dharmaputra. Then catching Sakuni's mocking eye, he picked up the dice. "Here are chests full of gold. I stake these," he said.

Duryodhana too placed heaps of gold of the same value. They played and Sakuni won.

"Here are pots full of jewels from my treasure house" said the Pandava king.

Duryodhana again put forward his stakes. Dharmaputra lost.

Soon the king of Indraprastha began to lose heavily. At first he lost horses, chariots, elephants and armies, but driven by the excitement of the game he went on playing until he began losing towns and villages.

As the game advanced there were murmurs all around. "Sakuni is not playing fair. Doesn't Dharmaputra see that he is cheating?" But neither Duryodhana nor Dharmaputra heeded them, so engrossed were they in the game.

Vidura was imploring the blind king to stop the game. "My king, your son has been foolish to start all this. He does not know

what may befall him if he makes enemies of the Pandavas. It is easy to beat them at dice but not in battle. Duryodhana will bring ruin to the Kurus. Stop the gambling," he said.

The old king was silent.

"Disown Duryodhana before he brings you to grief. Don't you remember the ill-omens that appeared when he was born? They were to warn us of the trouble he would bring," urged Vidura.

Duryodhana heard him and was wild with anger. "You are a traitor to the hand that feeds you," he cried.

Vidura turned to Bhisma for support but he seemed too stunned by the turn of events to be able to say anything.

Dharmaputra had now lost everything including his kingdom.

"Have you nothing more to stake?" asked Sakuni.

Dharmaputra did not like to admit defeat. He thought for a while, then his face broke into smiles. "Yes, of course I have. Here is my dark eyed Sahadeva. I stake him against all that I have so far lost," he said.

The fever of the game had mounted to his head and he did not know what he was doing. The other brothers watched Sahadeva being played as a stake in an agony of despair. They were helpless. They could not draw Dharmaputra away from the game nor could they openly chide him for what he was doing. He was not only their elder brother but their king and they had to submit to his will. This was the ancient Dharma.

Sahadeva was lost.

"Here is Prince Nakula, beloved of Madri. I stake him and if I win I shall get my kingdom back," said Dharmaputra, completely overcome by the game.

Sakuni won again.

"Here is Arjuna, who is like a boat that carries us across the sea

of battle. Here is the hero of the three worlds. I stake him and surely I shall win all."

Instead of gaining his kingdom, Dharmaputra lost Arjuna.

"Here is Bhima, the son of the wind with a neck like a lion's and the gait of an elephant" said the eldest Pandava and Bhima, too, was lost.

Poor Dharmaputra sat perplexed for sometime. Then a bright idea struck him.

He himself stood as stake against his kingdom and his brothers.

He lost again.

"The heroes of Indraprastha are now our slaves," cried Duryodhana with triumph ringing in his voice.

"There is still hope, king. Why not stake Draupadi? She is free as yet," said Sakuni to Dharmaputra, who sat before him with downcast eyes.

There was a stir among the Pandavas but none of them spoke. They were now Duryodhana's slaves and had no voice in any matter.

Dharmaputra did not stop to think. While the brothers looked on with dread, he said, "Here is Draupadi, the princess of Panchala, who is as pure as she is beautiful. I stake her."

Sakuni threw the dice very cleverly and Draupadi was lost. The shock stunned the assembly. Only Karna and Duchasana laughed with glee. Vidura noticed with sorrow that the old king could hardly contain his joy when he heard Draupadi had been won.

"Draupadi is now our slave. Go and bring her here," said Duryodhana, turning to Duchasana.

At these words, all present trembled.

"Duryodhana, your words sound your own doom. Do not provoke the Pandava lions," said Vidura and again he looked at Bhisma for support.

Bhismha hung his head in silence. "I have no right here. I am not the king and none need listen to me if they have no mind to it," he seemed to say.

Draupadi refused to come into the assembly hall. When Duchasana insisted she ran towards Gandhari's apartments for protection. It was then that Duchasana seized her by the hair and dragged her into the great hall. At the sight of this infamous behaviour, Bhima fumed with rage. He turned to Dharmaputra and spoke with bitter anguish.

"This is your doing. I shall make you suffer for it. Nakula, prepare a fire. Let me burn the hands that gambled away our beloved Draupadi." As he spoke he almost wept for what he was about to do.

Arjuna calmed him.

"Don't torture our gentle brother. He is already unhappy for what he has done. Don't you see? They would like us to quarrel and you are doing just what they want of us," he said.

Bhima saw the truth of these words. With a supreme effort, he controlled his feelings and sat down.

CHAPTER 8

Draupadi's hair was crumpled and her garment disarranged but she faced the assembly with a proud tilt of her beautiful head. Anger blazed out of her eyes as she spoke.

"Nobles, princes, is there none here who has the courage to speak for me? Why are Bhisma, Drona and Vidura dumb? Have they lost their virtue? Duchasana, you dared to touch me? The Pandavas may now be bound by honour to stay their hand but one day you will pay for what you have done. They will never forgive you for this and even if Indra becomes your friend you cannot escape them. Answer me, you great Kuru elders, who was lost first, Dharmaputra or I? If he was lost first how could he, a slave, have the right to stake me?"

There was a great uproar in the hall. Every one spoke at once. Drona murmured something to the old king which nobody heard. Others argued among themselves whether the staking of Draupadi was in order. Bhisma begged the king most earnestly to restore to the Pandavas their lost kingdom and put an end to the shameful scene. His words fell on deaf ears.

Then Karna, remembering how he had been forced to give up trying for the hand of Draupadi, thought this was the hour to get his own back on the Pandavas who had won her. He laughed and said. "Draupadi was won in a game of dice. She belongs to Duryodhana. Why, even the clothes she wears belong to him."

"That's true. Even her clothes belong to me. Duchasana, pull off her robe," cried Duryodhana.

At these words, a thrill of horror ran through the hall.

Duchasana tried to pull off Draupadi's robe.

Bhima who had so far sat quiet could bear no more. Choking with grief and anger, he got up and said, "Hear my words, great nobles. A day will come when in battle I shall tear the breast of this beast who has dared to insult Draupadi."

Duchasana paid no heed but went on pulling at Draupadi's robe. None came forward to stop him. The Pandavas had played and lost. They were bound by the rules of the game to keep their word. The Kuru elders seemed frozen in their seats. In her hour of need Draupadi could think of none other than Krishna, the saviour. She prayed to him who was at Dwaraka.

"Krishna, I am being insulted by the Kurus in their own assembly hall. Help me, save me from the shame of it, oh lord of Dwaraka," she cried.

Then a miracle happened. An endless stream of glorious robes grew on her. Pull and tug as Duchasana might, he could not disrobe her. His arms ached with the toil but it was endless. Robe after robe trailed to the ground and yet new ones appeared. At last tired and defeated Duchasana gave up the struggle.

Cries of admiration broke out all over the hall. "Great is the compassion of Lord Krishna," they said.

Draupadi wept piteously. She who had been the darling of King Drupada's heart and whom the Pandavas regarded as their very life, had been dragged out and brutally handled before the public gaze. "Tell me at least now, great Kurus, whether I am in truth Duryodhana's slave?" she asked between sobs.

Nobody there uttered a word. They were struck dumb by the miracle. Finally Duryodhana answered. "If Bhima and others admit that Dharmaputra did wrong to play them off as stakes, I shall let you go," he said.

"Never," cried Bhima, jumping up in fury. "Never can he do wrong in our eyes or in the eyes of the world. Dharmaputra is the very soul of honour. So great is his sense of what is right that he thought a king must answer a challenge even if it be only in dice."

"You see, Draupadi, how they stick together. Bhima is not willing to blame his brother even to gain your freedom," sneered Duryodhana.

Bhima's wrath knew no bounds. "May my soul never rest in peace if, in battle, I do not tear you into pieces," he said in passion.

Just then Gandhari came in. She had heard of what had taken place. "Dear king," she said to her husband. "This outrage is a disgrace to the Kuru race. Do not allow Duryodhana to insult the Pandavas further. If you do, our own sons are doomed, for none of them will escape the wrath of Bhima."

Fear gripped the blind king's heart. He had heard Bhima's oaths. Nerve-shaken, he called Draupadi and tried to soothe her with honeyed words. "Dear Draupadi, forget Duryodhana's follies. I know you will, for you are as kind as you are chaste. Calm your husbands and take them home. I give back to them all that they lost," he said. Bhism and Vidura gave a sigh of relief.

The Pandavas were leaving. Outside, near the palace gate, horses were being yoked to their chariots. Arjuna and Bhima were loading their weapons into them, looking at them longingly and dreaming of vengeance. Vidura was talking to Dharmaputra. Bhism's eyes were full of unshed tears. He could not speak.

"Your father has given away everything that I won with so much trouble," Sakuni was saying to Duryodhana.

Duryodhana frowned.

"The Pandavas will now grow more and more powerful and do you think they will ever forget? I can see Arjuna out there in the courtyard drawing the string of his Gandiva. Bhima is twirling his mace with impatience. Do you think they will forgive what you did to their wife? Not even the good Dharmaputra would do that. Duryodhana, I shudder to think of what may befall you," said the cunning Sakuni.

Goaded to fury by his words, the Kaurava prince turned on his father. "What have you done? By letting them go you have put the noose round my very neck. I cannot let them depart. Do you hear, father? I insist on calling them back and playing again," he said.

Drona, Bhismra, Vidura and Gandhari entreated the blind king not to let the play begin again but the father's heart was with his son. He remained silent.

"If you win you shall have your kingdom back," said Sakuni to Dharmaputra.

"The counterstake this time is to be exile. The losers must dwell in the forest for twelve years as hermits. The thirteenth year must be lived in hiding. If they are discovered during that year they will have to go into exile for another twelve years," said Duryodhana. It seemed as if he hoped to keep the Pandavas forever in exile.

The dice was cast. The result was a foregone conclusion. For the last time Dharmputra lost to the wily Sakuni.

The defeated king and his brothers cast off their royal robes and clad themselves in deerskin as hermits do. While they were doing so, Duryodhana laughed loudly, casting mocking glances at them.

"Fool, you prate too much. Just wait till these thirteen years are over and we are free from our bond. There will be a war if you do not return to us our kingdom and you shall be slain in battle. Arjuna shall kill Karna, Sahadeva shall slay Sakuni and I myself shall despatch the hundred Kauravas," said Bhima, his eyes flaming red with anger.

Then each of the other brothers swore in turn the same oaths as Bhima had before them.

The elders there shuddered at the oaths. The earth shook and heavy clouds covered the sky turning day into night. The wind rocked the trees and lightning streaked across the darkness. Jackals howled and birds shrieked. Bhismra dreaded to think what misfortune this fury foretold. Heaven itself was protesting at the exile of the Pandavas.

Kunti wept. She was to be left behind with Vidura, for she was too old now to stand the strains of exile. Subhadra and her son Abhimanyu were to go to Krishna, and Draupadi's five sons to their grandfather Drupada. Draupadi and the five brothers sorrowfully took leave of their dear ones and went their way. Bhima looked at



The wind rocked the trees and lightning streaked across the darkness

his powerful arms as he strode along as if to say, "With these I shall kill them." Arjuna scattered the sand to the winds with his feet and thought "Thus shall I scatter them." Dharmaputra walked with his eyes turned away so that the anger in them might not scorch the Kauravas. Draupadi wept, her hair flowing loose. As she went, she swore she would not put it up again until Duchasana, who had so cruelly torn it, lay dead. Nakula and Sahadeva smeared themselves with dust. "Thus shall we smear ourselves with the blood of our dead enemies," they murmured. The Pandava priest went with them muttering the terrible verses of the death ceremony.

When Vidura told the blind king how the Pandavas had left, the blood froze in his veins. Then and there he sensed his coming doom.

CHAPTER 9

As they walked, the Pandavas thought of their past glory and present downfall. Their hearts burned with bitter resentment. When they reached the gates of the city, their retinue joined them, bringing them their chariots and weapons. Many brahmins wished to go with them into exile. The people of Hastinapura applauded these brahmins saying it was better to go with the Pandavas to the forest than stay with the Kauravas in the city. They flocked to the gates in large numbers and wept bitterly at having to part with their favourite princes.

Late in the day, the Pandavas reached the banks of the Ganga, where they rested for the night. The next day they reached the forest of Kamyaka on the river Sarasvati. Here they met many kings and friends who had come to see them. Among them were Krishna, Drupada and his sons. Drupada heard with amazement what had taken place. He could not believe his ears.

"I am shocked to hear that King Dritarashtra allowed such things to happen," said Drupada.

"I wish I had been there from the beginning. I might have been able to stop the mischief," said Krishna.

"Do not be unhappy," said Draupada to his sister. "I shall avenge the injury done to you."

Draupadi wept. "Krishna, surely you who saved me must know what I suffered at Duchasana's hands?"

Krishna comforted her. "Your enemies shall perish. You shall be queen of the world," he said.

"Krishna, take Abhimanyu with you and teach him to be like his father, Arjuna. Let his enemies marvel at his spirit and tremble at his approach. You are the best guide anybody could have. Take him with you," said Dharmaputra.

Sorrowfully, the friends of the Pandavas took leave of them.

The exiles entered the jungle that was to be their home. It was late summer. The trees were bent with fruit and the bees hummed over the lotus ponds. Here and there scattered about were the hermitages of the sages. The Pandavas settled amidst them. Every day they went out to gather roots and fruits and to hunt deer. Whatever food they found, they gave first to the brahmins who shared their exile; they themselves ate sparingly.

The sages taught them the wisdom of the Vedas and the brahmins the rule of Dharma. The brothers lived as king Pandu had lived long ago. They seemed happy but inwardly they chafed. How could heroes brook the dullness of a sage's life?

One day Draupadi said to Dharmaputra. "It is a poor reward Bhima, Arjuna and the twins have gained for their courage and chivalry. You have bound them to this irksome life and expect them to swallow the memory of Duryodhana's insults!"

"Dear Draupadi, have patience. We are bound by our promise and must eke out this living for thirteen years," said Dharmaputra.

"You talk like a sage and not like a warrior," burst out Bhima. "It is most humiliating to live as we do. Here is Arjuna whose arrows none can beat and here are my sinewy arms aching to fight. How can we have the patience to wait? Let us attack the Kauravas like true soldiers."

Dharmaputra sighed. "I do not blame you for what you feel. My own folly has brought this upon all of you. Yet, you know well how Duryodhana made the stake clear at the last throw and how I agreed. How can I go back on my word?"

"Thirteen years is too long to wait. Moreover, we are too well known and it would be impossible to hide for a year without being discovered. Duryodhana has done this out of spite. Let us foil his plan by giving battle."

"Even if we fight what chance have we of victory? You forget Bhism, son of Ganga, is invincible. Though he is our grandfather too, he is bound by honour to fight for Duryodhana. Then there is

Drona. He too is bound to them by the rewards the old king has heaped on him. He is a master of celestial weapons and difficult to defeat. Karna is easily a match for Arjuna. We cannot be sure of winning even if we fight."

Bhima saw that his brother was right and became silent.

Dharmaputra pondered over his own words. He was sure that when the time came they would find it very hard to overcome Bhisma and Drona. Troubled, he asked the sages of the forest for their advice. "Arjuna is a great warrior and can slay many foes but he needs better weapons than those he has if he is to defeat Bhisma and Drona. Let him pray to the great God Siva for mightier weapons. Once Arjuna wins the favour of Siva none in the whole world will be able to stand against him," came the reply.

The exiled king embraced Arjuna. "Dear brother, Bhisma, Karna and Drona know the whole of the art of arms. You must learn enough to defeat them. Lord Siva is our only hope. Go and pray to him for weapons that will destroy our enemies. You alone of the five of us can do this hard task," he said.

Arjuna took a tender farewell of Draupadi and set out with high courage. The brothers watched him go with troubled hearts for it was no mean endeavour on which he was bent. The hero, however, felt no fears and no doubts. Wearing his coat of mail and carrying his bow and arrows, he strode out of the forest towards the threatening mountains. He walked day and night through dark winding valleys, deep gorges and over grim mountains. He crossed narrow perilous passes and jungles infested with wild animals. Through rain and storm he struggled on, often falling on the treacherous rocks.

Undaunted he walked on towards the distant peaks. Suddenly a voice broke the silence. Before him stood Indra, king of Heaven. With wondering eyes Arjuna gazed at his shining beauty.

"Child, I am Indra, your celestial father. Why are you wandering here alone?"



The great God Siva himself appeared.

Reverently bowing his head, Arjuna told him of his quest.

"Live here on these slopes and fixing your mind on the Great God, pray to him, eating only dry leaves. Siva shall reward you." Thus saying, Indra vanished.

When he had gone, Arjuna gave himself up to prayer with single-minded devotion. Seated cross-legged on a deerskin, his body motionless, his eyes level, he meditated on the mighty Siva. At first he ate a little but as time went on he gave up all thought of food or sleep. For long months Arjuna went through the severe hardships of deep penance.

At last, moved by his prayers, the great God Siva himself appeared before him, radiant and glorious. Blinded by the dazzling apparition, Arjuna bowed down in worship.

"God of gods, purest of the pure, I am blessed. Save us; protect us from destruction," he prayed.

A smile curved the divine lips. "I am pleased with you, great Pandava, ask for any boon you wish," said Siva.

"You, who can create and destroy the Universe at will, help me to kill my enemies. Grant me weapons which when hurled with spells will shatter the greatest foes on earth," said Arjuna.

"Dear Arjuna, your wish is granted. I shall give you a weapon against the forces of evil. So wonderful is it that it can be thrown or withdrawn by the mind, the eye, the bow or by words. If you use it against a human foe it will destroy the world. You must be careful," said God Siva. Thus saying the lord of the Universe taught Arjuna the secret of the great weapon. Then, like the glow of the setting sun, he beamed in the sky for a moment and disappeared.

Indra sent his own chariot down to fetch Arjuna and he was carried to the palace of the king of Heaven. In that land of dreams, there was no heat or cold, no sorrow or fatigue, neither old age nor death. Musicians played on stringed lutes, sweet angels sang and sages chanted the sacred Vedas. Saints and warriors shone in the lustre of their own glory. In their midst, surrounded by other shining gods, sat Indra in all his splendour. He opened his arms to receive Arjuna.

For many months, Arjuna lived in his father's palace, learning from him how to use and withdraw divine weapons. Other gods also showed him favours and the divine musicians taught him how to dance and sing. He dwelt there in heavenly bliss until the thought of Draupadi and his brothers made him long to return.

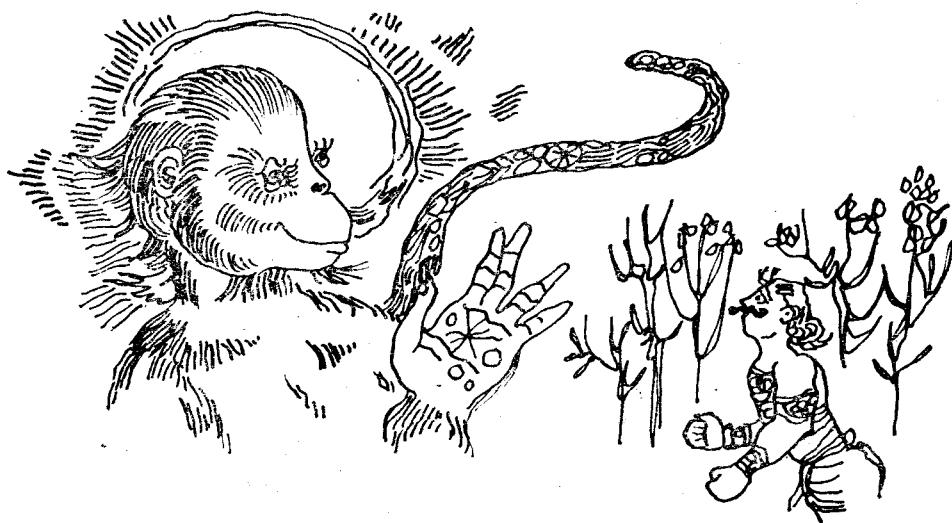
Indra took him back in his own chariot. Looking radiantly happy, Arjuna alighted from the chariot. His brothers were transported with joy and embraced him warmly. Draupadi looked on with tears of thankfulness in her eyes. These long months of anxious waiting had been painful for them. Arjuna told them of his long penance and of the wonderful boon given by the great Siva himself.

"Indra too has favoured me and so have the other gods. We need no longer fear Bhism or Drona. The Kauravas are as good as slain," he said.

"Yes, we are now doubly sure of victory, for Bhima also has received a boon," said Draupadi.

Arjuna looked inquiringly at his brother.

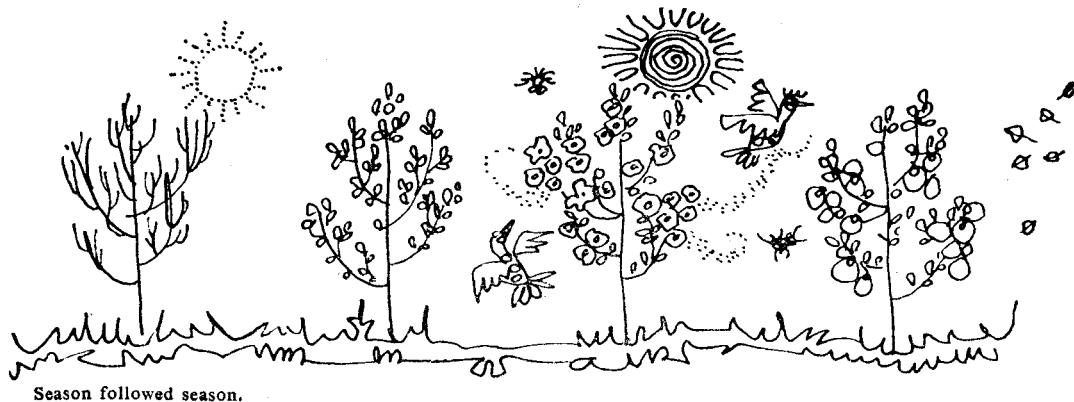
"I went in search of a perfumed flower Draupadi wanted," said Bhima. "A huge monkey lay in my path and refused to move. I did not like his scornful manner and was roused to wrath when he said that if I wished to go on I must first move his tail out of the way. 'What arrogance!' I said to myself and bent down determined to pick it up and fling it away. What was my surprise to find I could not even lift it! It stuck to the ground, huge and immovable like the Himalayas. I stared at the mighty being in great awe until he got up and embraced me. It was my brother, son of the wind god and as powerful as the wind himself. 'Ask me for any boon you desire,' he said to me. I begged for strength to kill my foes. He laughed and gave me a



I stared at the mighty being in great awe.

hug. At once I felt myself growing as strong as a hundred lions. ‘When in battle think of me and your enemies shall hear in your voice the wind god roaring the note of doom,’ he said. Now we shall conquer the world,” said Bhima, spreading out his huge arms.

Sure of the future, the Pandavas rejoiced together as if the battle were already won.



Season followed season.

CHAPTER 10

In the Kamyaka forest, season followed season. The trees clad themselves in joyous green as often as summer came and fled. The Pandavas spent their time in hunting or listening to the pious sages. One of the sages taught Dharmaputra the art of dice playing. Thenceforth he had nothing to fear from men like Sakuni, for he himself had become a master of the game.

Krishna came often, helping them to while away their time. Again and again he soothed Bhima's anger and curbed Arjuna's impatience, assuring them of a sure victory after the exile.

Some of the brahmins who had set out with the Pandavas wandered off to other places. A few came back to Hastinapura and saw king Dhritarashtra.

"Have you seen the Pandavas?" the blind king asked them.

"Indeed we have," they answered. "They are in the Kamyaka forest waiting impatiently for the exile to be over. Bhima and Arjuna look constantly at their weapons and talk of war."

This worried the old king. He remembered the solemn oaths and the might of the Pandavas. Not so Duryodhana. He was filled with happiness to hear of their plight.

"Karna, what joy it would be to go and see the Pandavas suffering in exile!" he said to his friend.

"I should like nothing better," agreed Karna. When he thought of how he, too, could have been one of them and of how Kunti had deprived him of his birthright, his resentment deepened. "Let us camp near the lake of Dvaita on the borders of the Kamyaka," he said.

"Father will not allow it. He does not know that what has happened so far has no meaning for me unless I can see them suffering," said the Kaurava prince.

"I shall try and talk to him," said Karna.

The king was slow to consent but in his usual weak way yielded to persuasion. Duryodhana and his friends left for the forest in high spirits.

Now it happened that one of the musicians of the gods was staying at the lake. When Duryodhana's followers came to pitch their tents near by, there was a clash between the servants of both parties. Each appealed to their master.

"What impudence is this! Stand firm and strike hard," said Duryodhana to his guards.

The others did not shrink and there took place a short struggle. The divine musician used celestial weapons and in no time he made Karna flee for his life. He caught Duryodhana and bound him.

The news reached the five princes. Bhima was overjoyed. "Duryodhana has got his deserts. I am sure he came here only to gloat over us," he said.

Dharmaputra looked at him severely. "Is this how you take a disgrace to the Kuru house?" he said. "Go at once and rescue our cousins."

Sullen but abashed, Bhima and Arjuna got ready for battle. At the sound of Bhima's fearful roar and the twang of Arjuna's Gandiva, the divine visitors disappeared. It looked as if they had come merely to teach Duryodhana a lesson.

Shamefacedly, the Kauravas returned home. Karna tried to console his friend. "Take heart, Duryodhana," he said. "I swear to you I shall kill Arjuna in battle after the exile."

The twelve years were coming to an end. The thirteenth year was at hand. One day, following a deer, the brothers went deep into the jungle, far from their hermitage. Tired and thirsty, Dharmaputra sank to the ground.

"Go and get me some water, Nakula," he murmured.

At once Nakula climbed a tree and sighting a pool nearby, he hurried to it.

It was a beautiful lake set in the wilderness. Pink lotus bloomed in profusion and wild duck floated on the water. White cranes stood at the edge of the pool, feeding. Nakula was in no mood to admire the surroundings. He was thirsty and ran to the water.

"This lake is mine and you can have the water only if you explain what I seek to know," said a voice.

Nakula paid no attention to this but quickly drank the water. At once he fell down as though dead. When Nakula did not return, Dharmaputra sent Sahadeva. He too did not come back. Then he sent Arjuna and after that Bhima. None of them returned. At this, Dharmaputra grew deeply perturbed. What was keeping them? Why were they taking so long? Surely nobody would dare stand in the way of his valiant brothers. He decided to see for himself.

The pool looked entrancing. The white cranes were busy, fishing. Dharmaputra heard only the drone of black bees and the whistling of wild birds. Yet as soon as he stooped to drink the water, a voice spoke to him.

"Son of Pandu, do not drink the water before you answer my questions. Your brothers disobeyed me. See what has befallen them."

It was only then that Dharmaputra noticed his noble brothers stretched on the ground as though dead. How could it have happened? Who could have killed these heroes, he thought in bewildered pain. He looked wildly round to see who was talking to him. All that he saw was a crane.

"Great being, who are you and what do you want of us? You must be great or else you could not have subdued my unconquerable brothers. Ask and I shall try my best to answer," he said.

The crane, from whom the strange voice came, then asked, "Great Pandava, what makes the sun shine every day?"

"The power of the good," said Dharmaputra.

"What rescues a man from danger?"

"Courage."

"What is happiness, my friend?"

"The result of virtuous conduct," said Dharmaputra.

Suddenly the crane was no more and in its place stood Dharma, the god of wisdom. "My son, I am pleased with your answers," he said. "You have the qualities a son of mine should have. You shall be blessed and rule the earth. I came here to tell you where to spend your thirteenth year. Go to the court of King Virata and live there in hiding. You shall not be discovered and after the exile you shall regain your kingdom." The god smiled and vanished.

After he had gone, the four brothers woke up as if from sleep. Dharmaputra told them what had happened and they resolved to go to Matsya, the country of King Virata. With sad hearts, Draupadi and the five brothers took leave of the brahmins and the sages and set out once more on their travels.

When they came within sight of the city of Matsya, Dharmaputra said to Arjuna. "We must leave our weapons behind for they will betray us. Where shall we hide them?"

Arjuna found a large tree in a dreary place full of thorns and infested with snakes. Climbing it, he hid the famous Pandava weapons in the crook of its branches. There were swords as bright as fire and scimitars with jewelled hilts. There were bows that gleamed with golden edges and arrows with vulture's feathers. There were lances with blades sharp and venomous and spears with deadly burnished points. All these splendid weapons Arjuna hid from the eyes of the world deep inside the tree. Then clad in simple clothes, the Pandavas and Draupadi entered the famous city of Virata.



Valiant Nakula became master of the king's horses.

CHAPTER 11

"Great monarch, I have lost all my wealth and am without a home. Grant me shelter and protection. If you keep me at your court, I could amuse all of you by playing at dice. I am highly skilled at the game," said Dharmaputra, bowing low before King Virata.

The king marvelled at the proud bearing and handsome looks of the stranger and granted his request. The other brothers also found work in the king's household. The valiant Nakula became master of the king's horses and soon won renown for his skill in breaking steeds. The dark-eyed Sahadeva was the king's chief cowherd. Bhima became one of the cooks. Living in the royal kitchens, he was able to satisfy his enormous appetite. Arjuna

taught music and dancing to the princess Uttara, the king's daughter. Draupadi became the queen's hairdresser.

At first the queen refused to have her, seeing how beautiful she was. "I am afraid the king himself may lose his heart to you if he sees you," she said.

"You need have no fear," said Draupadi. "I am married and most devoted to my husband."

Still doubtful, the queen took her into service.

Draupadi dressed the queen's hair in most beautiful styles. She pounded sweet herbs for her perfume and made garlands of jasmine for her hair.

Thus the Pandavas spent the thirteenth year of their exile. They were not too unhappy. The king treated them well. Dharma-putra won money at dice. He was now an expert. Bhima enjoyed boxing matches with the king's wrestlers in his spare time. Draupadi had sweetmeats from his kitchen and milk from Sahadeva's cows.

The year was nearly over and all would have been well had it not been for Kichaka, the king's commander-in-chief. He was brother to the queen and often came to see her. One day, he chanced to see Draupadi who appeared to him like a goddess on earth. Love smote Kichaka and he begged her to be his. Draupadi shrank back in terror.

"I am married to kings who are more than human. Do not offend them by coveting me," she begged.

Kichaka laughed. "Don't you know I am equal to Bhima, the Pandava, in strength. Nobody can beat me in single combat," he boasted.

After that he often waylaid her and asked her to be his. At last Draupadi realised that only Bhima could save her from Kichaka. At dead of night, she stole into the kichen and woke her slumbering husband. Bhima was bewildered to find Draupadi crying on his shoulder. But when he heard her story, his huge body quivered with rage. His eyes flashed fire.



Bhima strangled his enemy to death.

"Kichaka dares to look at the wife of the five?" he thundered.

"Hush," said Draupadi in a whisper. "Be careful. Remember no one must know who you are."

"Leave it to me. But do as I tell you," he said and spoke softly into her ears. Draupadi nodded and slipped quietly away.

The next day, to Kichaka's delight, the queen's hairdresser agreed to his wishes. "Meet me tonight at twelve in the dance hall," she said and then softly added, "Nobody must know."

The commander-in-chief was transported with joy. He rubbed himself with sandalwood, put on silk robes and at midnight entered the dance hall. In the dim light of a lamp, he saw a figure crouching.

Eagerly, he went up and embraced it. What was his surprise when he found himself in an iron clasp. It was Bhima.

Kichaka fell on the unknown foe with courage. The two heroes struggled with each other in the darkness. Clasped in one another's arms they fought silently. Bhima, however, was too powerful for Kichaka. He struck blow after savage blow at his opponent, and with a final stupendous effort flung him to the ground. His knee upon Kichaka's chest, his mighty hands round Kichaka's throat, Bhima strangled his enemy to death. The body of King Virata's commander-in-chief lay sprawling on the dance floor. Bhima returned to the kitchen as if nothing had happened.

In the morning, when the death was discovered, the whole palace was plunged into gloom. The king was inconsolable for he had lost the strongest defender of his country.

The queen suspected her hairdresser who had talked of her divine husbands; plainly, only someone of superhuman strength could have killed Kichaka. She tried to send her away but Draupadi implored her to let her stay for just thirteen days longer. The queen was forced to agree, more out of fear than out of compassion.

Duryodhana's spies could find no trace of the Pandavas although they searched far and wide. The five brothers seemed to have disappeared completely. Then came the news of Kichaka's mysterious death. At this, Duryodhana grew alert for he knew that only Bhima was strong enough for such a deed.

"I feel certain now that the Pandavas are in the Matsya country. Let us attack Virata and if the Pandavas are there they will surely come out to help the king. If not, we have nothing to lose," he said.

The king of Trigarta, who was Duryodhana's friend, happened to be with him. "I will help you," he said. "I have long wanted to get to grips with the king of Matsyas. Let me invade from the south, seize his cattle and lay waste his lands. Virata will hasten to the defence. While he is engaged in fighting me, your army can march in from the north."

Delighted with the plan, Duryodhana worked it out in careful detail. Soon afterwards, the cowherds of Virata ran to him in fright. "Help, great king. The Trigartas are seizing our cows by the thousand," they cried.

The king mustered his army in haste. With its cavalry, elephant corps and hosts of foot soldiers, it looked a formidable host. Virata and his sons put on shining armour and were about to ride away, when the Pandavas, all save Arjuna, arrived and prayed that they might be allowed to fight too. The king agreed, for all along he had sensed that these were more than mere menials. With glad hearts, the Pandavas donned their coats of mail and took up arms once more.

The army marched towards the south. Soon the king's scouts who were following the hoof-prints of the cattle reported that the Trigartas were in the next valley.

Meanwhile, the king of Trigarta was saying to his brother. "Let us be the first to strike. I would like to settle my score with Virata by capturing him alive."

They marched forward quickly. To the sound of a thousand trumpets the two armies clashed in bloody battle. While the armies were locked in a fierce struggle, the king of Trigarta drove furiously into the thick of the fight. His brother followed him closely. Together they attacked Virata, and shattering his chariot, killed the horses. Virata stood firm, rendering blow for blow, but the odds were too heavy against him. Soon, not only his charioteer, but his whole bodyguard lay dead around him. Though King Virata found himself alone, he fought doggedly, but was overwhelmed and carried away by the king of Trigarta. The Matsya army panicked and began to flee.

"Bhima, Bhima, the enemy has captured Virata and his men are falling back. To the rescue with all speed!" cried Dharmaputra to his brother.

Bhima lost no time and set off in hot pursuit of the king of

Trigarta. The twins too had heard and, swords flashing, carved their way into the thick of the fight. Dharmaputra was no less valiant. The Matsya warriors, seeing these brave heroes advancing, took courage and threw themselves into the fight once more. Bhima overtook the chariot in which the king of Trigarta was carrying Virata away, and slew the horses and the driver. Leaping out of his own chariot, he seized the king of Trigarta by the hair and hurled him to the ground.

Meanwhile, the twins were working havoc among the Trigartas. Blood stained the brown earth. Men were hurled from their chariots and sucked into the heart of the battle. Bodies lay in heaps. The Trigartas, hard pressed beyond endurance, heard that their king had fallen. They turned and fled. Bhima made the king of Trigarta bend his knee to Virata.

The king of Matsyas turned to the Pandavas. "Noble heroes, I know not whence you come or who you are but certainly you are mighty. You have saved my honour and I am for ever in your debt. All that I have is yours," he said.

He then sent word to his capital city, proclaiming his victory and announcing his triumphal entry the next day.

CHAPTER 12

When Duryodhana invaded Matsya from the north and marched towards its capital, there was not a soldier to stop his advance. The entire Matsya force was in the south fighting the Trigartas.

The chief cowherd of the northern zone rode in haste into the city but he found it deserted. Only the king's youngest son was there.

"My forefathers were kings and warriors. I have soldiers' blood in my veins. If only I could get a good charioteer, I would fight the Kauravas single-handed," said Uttar, the young prince.

He was with his sister in the inner apartments when he said this and Draupadi heard him. She smiled and said. "Why don't you take the music teacher with you? I hear he was charioteer to the famous Arjuna."

Hardly were the words out of her mouth than Arjuna stood before the prince impatient to be off. Uttar heartily wished he had never spoken.

"I cannot go. I spoke in jest. Why, I am not even of age!" he said.

Arjuna pretended not to hear. Donning his coat of mail and yoking the horses, he got ready to start. The ladies of the court before whom Uttar had boasted were looking on. The prince dared not withdraw. With a faint heart, he climbed into the chariot and was rapidly driven away by Arjuna.

Soon they sighted the Kaurava army at a distance. Its banners floated gaily in the breeze and the jewelled weapons flashed fire in the sunlight. Clouds of dust rose from beneath the trampling feet.

"Turn back. How can I face this vast army all alone?" cried prince Uttar.

"You cannot go back now. They will laugh at you," said Arjuna.

"No matter. I only know I cannot fight the Kauravas," cried Uttar and leaping out of the chariot, began to run away.

Arjuna ran after him and stopped him. "Come, take courage. I will do the fighting. You have but to hold the reins for me," he said and lifted the pale-faced boy into the driver's seat.

By this time, they were near the great tree where Arjuna had hidden the Pandava weapons. He made Uttar climb up and bring them down. A flood of happiness filled him at the sight of his beloved Gandhiva. Uttar was amazed to see the gleaming sight of those splendid weapons. He looked at them and then at the so-called music teacher. Something dawned within him. He fell down on his knees before Arjuna.

"Tell me who you are. I feel I am looking upon a great warrior," he said in wonder. Arjuna smiled and told him the truth.

"Arjuna! Am I to be charioteer to the great Arjuna, the hero of the three worlds! Then command. I shall obey. I shall drive straight to death if need be," cried Prince Uttar.

Then, taking up the reins, the once timid prince drove into the battlefield with wheels thundering doom.

"It is the twang of the Gandiva that I hear. Arjuna is at hand. There will be terrible slaughter. Be on your guard," said Drona and he hastily began to reform his lines.

"Arjuna is nothing compared with me, yet how you do praise him!" complained Karna.

"If it is Arjuna, then the Pandavas are caught. They will have to go back into exile for showing themselves before the appointed time," said Duryodhana.

"I have counted the moons and the seasons. The thirteen years finish today. The sons of Pandu have kept their word," said Bhisma.

"How is that? Are you sure?" demanded Duryodhana. Bhisma nodded.

"It is Arjuna. I see the ape-banner," said Drona almost joyfully.

"Yes, it is. Look, here are two arrows at my feet. Arjuna is bowing to me. Here is one speeding past my ear. He is whispering his greetings," murmured Bhisma in a voice choked with tears.

The great Arjuna covered the Kaurava troops with countless arrows so rapidly that the soldiers were blinded and unable to see. Bewildered and confused, they were scattered like frightened deer. In vain Drona and Bhisma tried to rally them. The Kaurava army fled in all directions.

The chariot-warriors suffered a similar fate. Arjuna swept through them as fire sweeps through a forest. Just then Karna, foremost among them all, rode in and Arjuna received a check. The heroic Karna discharged a flight of arrows so well directed and so powerful that they pierced Arjuna's banner and wounded prince Uttar. Undaunted, Arjuna drove straight at Karna, aiming his crescent shaped arrows. They struck Karna in the chest and he had to retire.

At that moment, Bhisma, Drona and Aswathama surrounded the lone Arjuna. Hard pressed though he was, the gallant Pandava shrank from the thought of wounding his grandfather and teacher. Instead, he took up one of Indra's divine weapons and sending out a bright shower of arrows threw the whole army into an enchanted sleep. By the time the Kaurava troops awoke, Arjuna was far away, driving Virata's cattle safely home.*

Meanwhile, King Virata returned to his city in triumph but his happiness was shattered when he heard that Uttar had gone alone to meet the Kaurava army. "He is sure to have met with death," he moaned, knowing that it was too late to go to his rescue.

To his utter amazement, in came the conquering hero, his chariot wheels thundering out his victory.

"The Kaurava army has been completely routed," said the prince to his father who embraced him thankfully, his heart swelling with pride.

"My son, you are indeed a great warrior to have been able to quell the Kauravas single-handed," said Virata.

Prince Uttar hung his head for a moment, then looking up at his father with a radiant face, he proclaimed, "I was charioteer to the greatest hero on earth." He then unfolded the whole story to his astonished father who summoned the Pandavas with joyful speed.

"I should have known who rescued me when the king of Trigarta fell. I am twice blessed. You saved first me and then my son," he cried. "How can I show my gratitude, save by offering you all I possess—my army, my kingdom and my riches? My daughter Uttara shall wed the noble Arjuna."

"She shall do better. She shall marry my son Abhimanyu," said Arjuna.

To the country of the Matsyas, came Krishna, Subhadra and Abhimanyu. Drupada too came bringing with him the sons of Draupadi. Many other kings and nobles joined the Pandavas when they heard the exile was over.

The wedding festival went on for many days. The Princess Uttara, of great beauty, gorgeously adorned, was given away by her father; Abhimanyu clasped her hand with joy. As he stood there, proud and godlike, on all sides one heard talk of his courage and chivalry.

Virata gave costly presents to his daughter. The people of the capital rejoiced at the happiness of their princess. In the Matsya king, the Pandavas had gained yet another powerful ally.

CHAPTER 13

The day after the wedding, the Pandavas and their friends gathered in the court hall of King Virata. Now that their exile was over it was time to think of how to get back to Indraprastha. All eyes turned towards Krishna.

"The Pandavas have kept their word and stayed in exile for thirteen years. It is now Duryodhana's turn to return to them what was theirs. Let us send an ambassador to Hastinapura to ask for their kingdom with courtesy," said Krishna.

"Well said, but frame the request gently without provoking Duryodhana. He has had the realm to himself all these years and may find it difficult to part with it," said one of the kings.

"Why such weakness? Isn't Indraprastha a Pandava kingdom? Let the Kauravas know that if they refuse, we shall help the Pandavas to recover it by force," protested another.

"Peace is better than war," said a third.

Drupada, king of Panchala, spoke with calm deliberation. "If we seem too humble, we shall only make Duryodhana more stubborn and arrogant. Let us ask with dignity. Meanwhile let us prepare for war. I am certain Duryodhana will not give up Indraprastha nor will his doting father have the courage himself to yield it to the Pandavas."

"I agree. The Pandava claim is just and honourable. Let us hope Duryodhana will have the sense to see it," said Krishna.

On that the assembly dispersed, and Krishna and the other kings went home. The Pandavas began to assemble a huge army with the help of Drupada and Virata.

It was the custom that when a ruler was approached for aid by both sides in a coming battle, he should give his help to the first comer. Fearing war would come, the Pandavas hastened to make sure of their allies. Many mighty kings came gladly

bringing with them their armies. When the Kauravas heard of this they, too, began to gather their friends together. From all sides, horses galloped, chariots raced and the earth shook with the turmoil.

Arjuna went to Dwarka to ask for Krishna's help. Near the palace gates, he met Duryodhana who had arrived a little earlier. Together they went in and found Krishna sleeping. Duryodhana sat down near the head of the bed and waited in haughty pride. Arjuna stood humbly at the foot. Krishna woke up and saw Arjuna before him. Then he turned his head and his eyes fell on Duryodhana. He greeted them both with affection.

"Krishna, I have come to ask for your help in the coming war. I know you love us both equally and would make no difference between us. You should grant my wish first as I came in before Arjuna. If war comes, be with us," said Duryodhana.

"You may have come in before him but when I opened my eyes it was Arjuna whom I saw first. It seems to me, therefore, that I am bound to help both of you. Let me see. I have a large army. To one of you I shall give this army. The other shall have me, but I shall bear no arms and will not fight. Come, Arjuna, as the younger of the two, I give you the first choice," said Krishna.

Arjuna joyfully chose Krishna, and Duryodhana went away, delighted at the thought of having the massive forces of Krishna of Dwaraka.

"You have made a foolish choice. No wonder Duryodhana was elated. Why did you choose me? Of what help can I be to you unarmed?" said Krishna to Arjuna after Duryodhana had left.

"With you near me, I will have the strength to break the world asunder," said Arjuna. Krishna smiled.

Kings journeyed hither and thither. Great armies flowed like rivers to the Pandavas and Kauravas. Soon Duryodhana had eleven armies and the Pandavas seven.

The messenger of the Pandavas reached Hastinapura and was ushered into the presence of the blind king. There he sat, attended by the venerable Bhisma, Drona, mighty in arms and Vidura, wise in counsel. Prince Duryodhana, too, was present, with the brave and loyal Karna by his side.

"The Pandavas send you their affection and regard. Dharmaputra lost his throw and because of it had to go into exile. Had he won, he would have recovered his kingdom. The Pandavas have kept their part of the bargain. They have been in exile. They now ask for their kingdom back," he said, and withdrew, leaving the council to consider the answer.

"What they ask is but fair and just. Give it to them," said Bhisma. The old king turned to his son. "Bhisma is right. Let me give back to the Pandavas what is theirs. Half the kingdom is more than enough for you. My child, make me happy and say yes," said Dhritarashtra.

"Never, never shall I share my wealth with my cousins. Either slaying them, I shall enjoy the earth or being slain, I shall reach the glory of paradise," said Duryodhana.

"The Pandavas are too powerful, especially now, with the divine weapons of Arjuna. They would destroy you root and branch," said the old king with a groan.

"I know you are afraid of them because they are favoured by the gods. You forget I have Bhisma, Drona, his son Aswathama and Karna. I shall be victorious and Dharmaputra, beaten and humbled, shall cringe for mercy at my feet," said Duryodhana.

"Well said. I alone shall strike terror in their hearts and reduce the armies of the Matsyas and Panchalas to dust," said Karna.

"Indeed. Where was all this bravery of yours at the battle of the Matsyas? If I remember aright, single-handed, Arjuna drove our whole army out of the Matsya country," said Bhisma scornfully. Then, turning to Duryodhana, gravely he continued. "My prince, the



Left alone, the blind king.....

name of Kuru stands bright and unsullied. Do not tarnish it by doing what is not honourable."

Before Duryodhana could reply, Karna burst forth. "Bhism was always for the Pandavas. He speaks for them every time and loses no chance of taunting me," said Karna. In silent agreement, Duryodhana turned his back upon Bhism.

The council broke up in confusion. Seeing Bhism treated thus, Drona and Vidura knew that further speech would be useless.

Left alone, the blind king felt there was no end to his tribulations. With infinite sadness he sent for his trusted friend and charioteer, Sanjaya.

"Take the Pandava messenger back with you and go to Dharmaputra. Say my heart is with them and that I desire their happiness more than anything else. Speak soft words and see if you can turn them away from war," he said.

When he heard Sanjaya, it was clear to Dharmaputra that his peaceful mission had failed. He turned to Krishna. "They want to keep the kingdom and yet my uncle talks of peace. How can

that be? How can we live without a home? I swear to you I do not wish to kill my kinsmen. Only let our kingdom be returned to us. Krishna, help us. Go to Hastinapura and speak for us. Surely, they must listen to you!"

"I shall do my utmost," replied Krishna.

Even Arjuna and Bhima, who were burning with the memory of their wrongs, were ready to forgive and forget if Indraprastha was restored to them. "Go and make a just settlement for all. We shall accept it," they said.

Draupadi alone was implacable. Spreading out her tresses she looked at Krishna with smouldering eyes. "Krishna, look at my hair and remember how savagely it was torn," she said in a gust of anger. Her voice was for war.

The sun shone brightly and the fields were rich with corn. A fragrant breeze blew and the earth smiled as Krishna drove through the Kuru land. The city was agog with excitement. Krishna, the saviour himself was coming as a messenger of goodwill. The people cheered as his chariot drove into the gates. Bhism, Drona and Vidura received him with great honour and conducted him to the king.

The blind king awaited him in the great assembly hall. All the hundred Kauravas were there, seated in princely state and many kings adorned the court like jewels in a royal diadem.

Bhism offered Krishna a throne near the king. Krishna spoke eloquently and movingly. He warned the king that a terrible war would follow if he did not agree to the just claims of the Pandavas. "The kings of the earth feel that the Pandavas are in the right. Give them at least five villages. Dharmaputra would be content even with that," he said.

Duryodhana jumped up from his seat in anger. "Not even a needle point of land shall they have. I am the heir of the elder Kuru and by rights I should be king of all the Kuru land. Instead, when I was young, the elders gave away part of it to the

Pandavas saying they had a claim to it because their father had ruled as king for some time. I dispute that claim. Besides, how can they now have something which they have gambled away?" he said.

"It was your father Dhritarashtra who of his own accord gave them part of the kingdom. The Pandavas never demanded it. There was not a whisper from any of them about a claim," said Bhism.

"You would have been forced to return the kingdom to them had Dharmaputra won the throw," said Vidura.

Duryodhana did not like hearing this. He frowned. "As it happened, they did not win. They lost. They cannot claim something they have already lost," he said.

"If you provoke a quarrel you will perish," said Drona.

"What, you of all people say that?" asked Duryodhana.

Drona nodded. "Bhism and I are by honour bound to fight for you but we will not be able to prevent your destruction," said Drona.

"Why should they pick a quarrel with me? I have done them no harm. I am only keeping what is mine," said Duryodhana. Krishna's eyes grew crimson. "What," he cried. "Do you dare to say you have done them no injury? Kings and nobles, I hereby declare that what Duryodhana will not freely give now, the Pandavas shall wrest from him when he is lying on the battlefield gasping for his last breath."

"I am not afraid. It shall be a fight to the finish," retorted Duryodhana.

"Krishna, you have spoken the words of doom," said Bhism, sadly.

The blind king's heart shrivelled with fear. He sent for his queen and begged her to reason with her son.

"My boy, I speak as a mother who wishes both her sons well. Share the kingdom and live in peace. No matter who won or who

lost the dice-game. No matter who is the elder or who has the better claim," she said.

"Gandhari, how wise you are! How true your words! The past is dead. What matters is what is to come," said Bhisma.

"Mother, why do you interfere? You know nothing of all this," said Duryodhana. Turning on his heel he swept disdainfully from the court, followed by Karna and his brothers.

"Krishna, what can I do? I feel helpless. My son will not listen to any of us," said the blind king.

Krishna did not respond. He knew well that Dhritarashtra could have overruled his son had he wished.

"Nobles, ministers, you have seen how I tried to make a peaceful settlement. I fear it is now war," he said and left the court.

Before leaving Hastinapura, Krishna spoke to Karna alone. "You know who you really are, do you not?" he asked.

"Yes, I have known now for a long time," said Karna sadly.

"Come with me. Dharmaputra will receive you with open arms and crown you king as you are the eldest son of Kunti. Bhima and Arjuna, the greatest heroes of our age will be your comrades. The twins, Abhimanyu and I myself will serve you," said Krishna.

In a voice harsh with grief, Karna refused. "I knew long ago that I was Kunti's eldest son but I cannot desert Duryodhana. It was he who made me king and treated me with kindness when Bhima jeered at me for being a charioteer's son. It is Duryodhana who has given me all the love I have ever known. How can I leave him for a mother who never cared for me and for brothers who always scorned me? No, never," he said. Then with a deep sigh he murmured, "It is not to be."

When Krishna brought the news to Kunti, she forced herself to smile. "The time has come when my warrior sons must prove they are true children of Pandu," she said.

Secretly her heart was heavy with foreboding. She feared Karna would prove too much for the Pandavas, especially since he hated them for being the acknowledged sons of Pandu while he was not. She in her turn went to him hoping to win him over.

Karna looked at her with lifted brows. "What can I do for you, noble Kunti? What can the son of a mere charioteer do for the queen of Pandu?" he asked.

"You are no son of a charioteer. You are my son . . . born of the glorious sun god."

A slight smile played round Karna's lips. "You remember it only now?" he said, his heart contracting with pain.

"Karna, join your brothers and be happy. You are one of them," pleaded Kunti.

"And be traitor to the one man who has befriended me all along?" came the firm reply.

"You cannot have the heart to kill your own brothers?" she cried.

"Why not? Why should I show any love? Did you, when you so cruelly abandoned me to the river and deprived me of my birthright?" cried Karna. "I know well why you plead. It is not out of love for me. It is out of fear for the others. You need not be afraid. I swear to you that four of them I shall not harm. As for Arjuna, well, it shall be either him or me. One of us will fall in battle; when all is finished, you will have five sons left. That, I promise," said Karna. With that Kunti had to be content.

It was war. The two armies met at Kurukshetra. The Pandavas chose Draupada as their commander-in-chief and the army marched towards the famous field to the sound of drums and conches. At its head was Draupada followed by Bhima, Nakula, Sahadeva and the five sons of Draupadi. In the centre was Dharmaputra heavily guarded by a corps of picked soldiers. In

the rear were Arjuna, Krishna, Virata and his army. A long stream of wagons with food, fodder, tents, weapons, money-chests, physicians and cooks, followed. When they reached Kurukshetra, the Pandava army levelled that part of the ground which was to the east of the field and pitched their tents. It was a huge city of tents with colourful banners waving in the breeze. Dharmaputra stocked them with weapons, food and all other needs. Each division had its elephant corps, sheathed in steel plates, hundreds of horses and thousands of foot soldiers. The Pandava ranks seethed with activity as they feverishly prepared for the morrow.

Meanwhile, in Hastinapura, the Kauravas had not been idle.

Duryodhana bowed to Bhism. "Grandfather, you are the foremost warrior of our land. May it please you to take command of the army," he said.

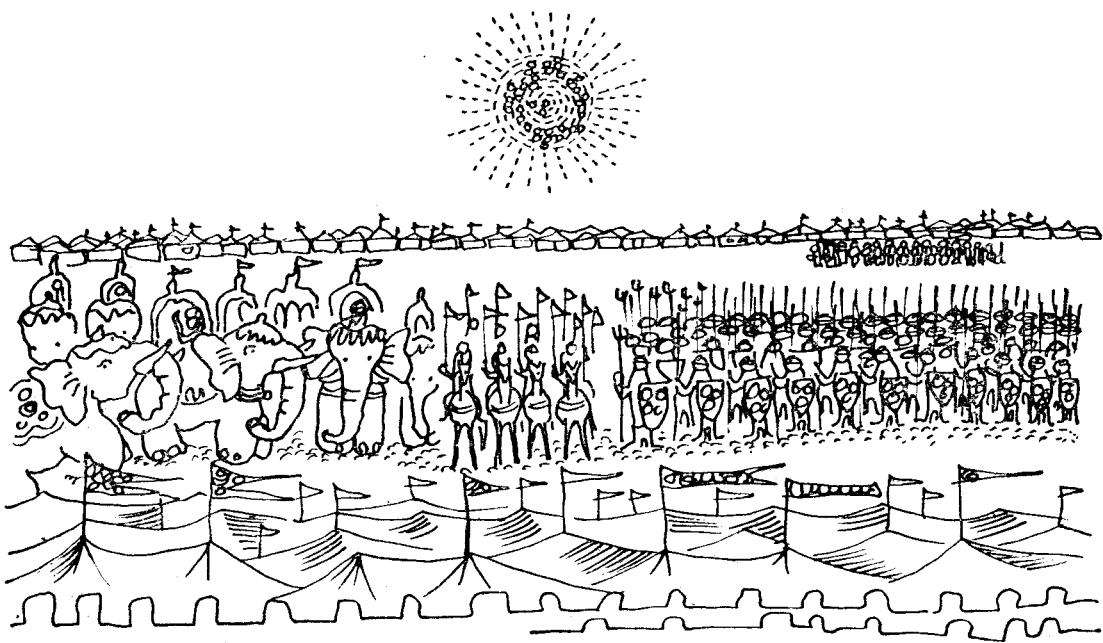
"Yes. In duty bound I shall fight for you, command your army and every day mow down hundreds of the enemy, but kill the sons of Pandu, I will not. They are as dear to me as you are. If you want them slain, ask Karna to be your commander. I shall readily stand down," said Bhism.

"You have made your choice, Duryodhana. Let him command but as long as he is alive I shall not enter the battle. He loves the Pandavas and his heart is not in the fight. I do not trust him," said Karna.

"You are proud and arrogant. It is you who have nourished this enmity between the cousins," said Bhism.

Duryodhana could not reconcile them. He was forced to let Karna go. Bhism was in command.

The Kaurava army encamped to the west of the plain of Kurukshetra. So rich in beauty was Duryodhana's city of tents that it looked like another Hastinapura. The Kaurava prince walked round his camp reviewing his troops. He felt well pleased with his forces. He outnumbered the Pandavas by eleven divisions to their seven. His elephant corps were very powerful and his



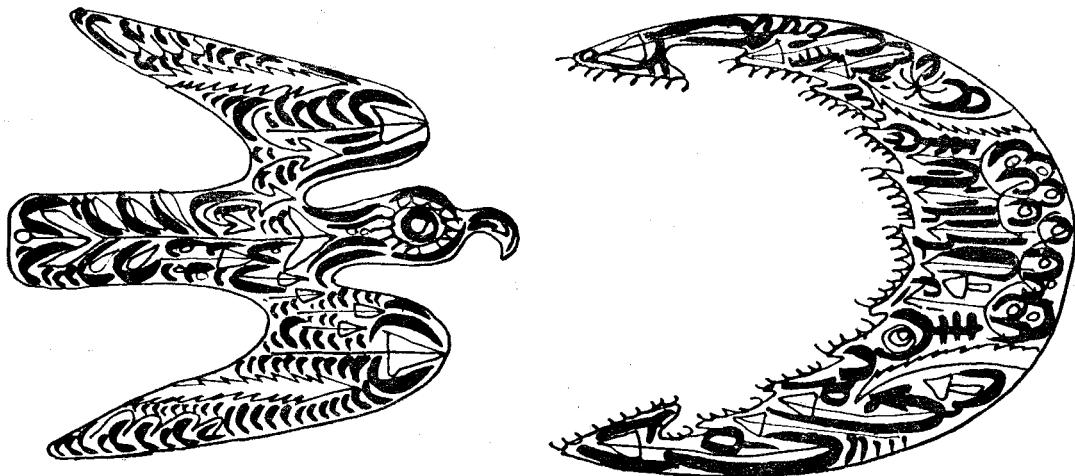
The Kaurava army encamped to the west of the plain at Kurukshetra.

foot soldiers well trained and drilled by Drona. It seemed as if the earth had been emptied and the whole of mankind had gathered at Kurukshetra. To the east and west, there appeared two oceans of men, stormy, turbulent and ready for war. Trumpets blew, conches sounded and voices roared like the murmur of angry seas. Impatiently, the two armies waited for the dawn.

CHAPTER 14

When the sun rose, Pandavas and Kauravas faced each other across the plain, thirsting for battle. As far as the sky-rimmed earth, nothing could be seen but shining banners, gleaming armour, and flashing weapons. Kurukshetra was a living tapestry of glowing colour.

The Pandavas saw Bhisma at the head of the eleven Kaurava divisions. Riding a silver chariot, encased in white armour, the old man looked resplendent. Drona stood commandingly in his chariot drawn by chestnut steeds. On his banner was blazoned a golden altar and a water pot. With them rode Duryodhana, proud and unafraid.



The two armies arrayed themselves in different formations.

Each day the two armies arrayed themselves in different formations. If the Kaurava army was formed in the shape of an eagle then the Pandavas formed a crescent moon in order to be able to attack them better. From the two horns of the crescent would come the first attack. On the first day the Kaurava army was shaped like a huge bird while the Pandavas formed lines which they called the thunderbolt of Indra.

Dharmaputra's banner bore the golden moon, and Bhima's a silver lion. The Kaurava trumpets shrilled the challenge and in



Krishna, I cannot kill my kinsmen.

answer came the roll of Pandava drums. A sudden cloud of dust obscured the sun for a moment. Just then, Arjuna sounded his conch. The sound sent a chill into the hearts of the Kauravas. They knew the battle would be hard and long.

“Krishna, drive my chariot between the two armies. Let me look on those I have to fight,” said Arjuna.

Krishna did so. The horses neighed and leapt into the air in a beautiful circle. Arjuna saw ranged on both sides, cousins, brothers, uncles and sons ready to fight each other. His heart was wrung with pity.

“Krishna, I cannot kill my kinsmen. My body trembles at the thought and Gandiva slips from my hands. Turn back. Not

for all the wealth in the world will I kill those who are near and dear to me. I do not crave for power and I have no heart for this fight. Let Duryodhana have everything he wants. I shall forget the injuries he did us," said Arjuna. Overcome with compassion, the great hero let fall his bow and sank back into his chariot.

"Arjuna, your words are unworthy of you—you who were born to be the destroyer of tyrants. Whence comes this weakness? How is it that you suddenly turn away from your duty? I know full well that it is hard to kill your own kinsmen, but when they side with the forces of evil, you must forget your scruples. If you turn your back to the enemy now, all men will despise you. Even death is better than dishonour. Stand up, my friend, and fight."

"Krishna, I cannot. Of what use is life itself to me when those I love are dead and gone?"

The Lord smiled. "You are a hero and yet fear to face the truth. Death comes to all, but death is not the end. In each of us dwells the spirit of God, which never dies though our bodies may perish."

Hearing him who was the true shepherd of our souls, Arjuna felt restored. He knew now what he must do. To be the best among men, he must do his duty. He must fight. He took up his Gandiva, once more, with a stout heart.

At this tense moment, Dharmaputra took off his armour, got down from his chariot and walked towards the enemy lines. Wondering what he was doing, his brothers followed him. He went through the jungle of enemy spears and swords with calm until he reached his grandfather.

"Forgive us, dear grandfather, for daring to give you battle. Please bless us and give us leave to begin," he said bowing to Bhisma.

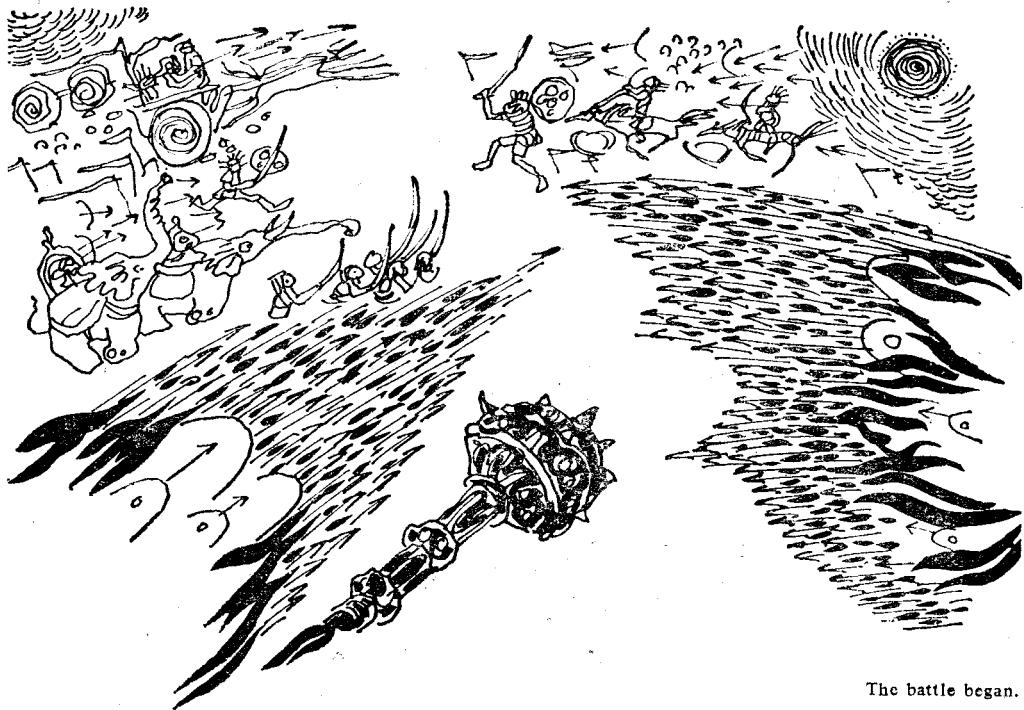
His grandfather looked at him sadly. "I am bound by duty to fight for the king of Hastinapura. I wish I could have stopped this spilling of blood between kinsmen. Fight, child and

strive for victory. May God bless you," he said with a sigh. The Pandavas then saluted Drona and returned to their army.

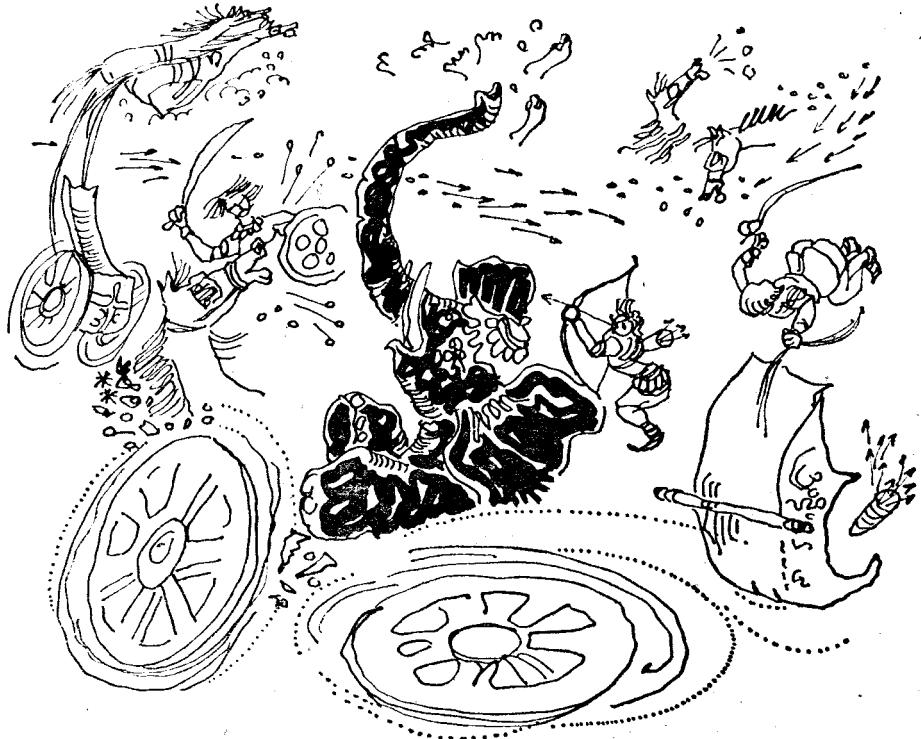
The battle began. With a huge shock the two armies clashed. Warriors in chariots attacked each other. The five sons of Draupadi rode forth, letting fly hundreds of arrows and clearing the ground for Bhima. Into the gap, Bhima rushed roaring and swinging his mace.

"Soldiers, the gates of heaven are flung open before you. What could be better than to die fighting and reach paradise? Come, charge," cried Duryodhana and launched himself against Bhima. The two cousins fought like wild elephants.

There were hundreds of single combats amongst the foot soldiers as well as those in chariots. Duchasana rode out and struck Nakula with many arrows, but the Pandava showed amazing skill. He cut down Duchasana's bow. Dharmaputra fought the



The battle began.



Elephants trumpeted.

king of Madra. The gentle ruler of Indraprastha turned into a furious lion on the battlefield.

"Strike, strike," cried Abhimanyu as he careered along in his chariot.

Horses neighed, elephants trumpeted and chariots crashed. Brother slew brother and fathers killed sons. Many a hero fell from his horse dying. The ground was covered with mangled corpses.

The Pandava lines tried to stand firm. All day long, they toiled to keep together but towards the evening they broke and retreated. They could not withstand Bhismā's powerful thrusts. In spite of his years, Bhismā moved about the field, killing the enemy in their hundreds. At the end of the day the Pandava losses were heavy.

" You would rather see our soldiers dead by thousands than kill your grandfather. Is that not so ?" asked Krishna of Arjuna the next day.

Arjuna flushed. " Drive against Bhisma," said he, with clenched teeth. He stretched Gandiva and his arrow flew straight. It cut Bhisma's bow in two but the veteran soldier strung another immediately. Arjuna severed that too.

" Bravo," said Bhisma. " Fight hard, my son."

Bhisma's arrows flew like tongues of fire and Arjuna was hard put to it to intercept them. Even so he could not bring himself to summon his divine weapons against his grandfather.

Bhisma wounded both Arjuna and Krishna although Krishna drove the chariot most skillfully. He circled round swiftly and cleverly avoided most of the arrows. All the same, a few struck home. The wounds on Krishna's blue body shone like red flowers.



Bhima mowed down the enemy.

The battle grew more and more bloody as days went by. Each day, the two armies re-arranged themselves in new formations and tried to break each other. Both the Kauravas and the Pandavas proved their valour. Bhima mowed down the enemy like the god

of death himself. Everyday one or more of the Kaurava brothers fell victims to his mighty mace. Stung beyond endurance, Duryodhana fought to revenge his brothers. Arjuna's Gandiva flashed like lightning but Bhisma kept him at bay. Abhimanyu was so brave, his feats so wonderful that often the Kauravas mistook him for his father Arjuna.

At sunset each day the field was strewn with the dead. Broken swords, bows and scimitars with jewelled handles lay spangled on the blood-stained earth. Pale dead faces and torn corpses covered the ground. The flower of the Kuru race lay dead on the field of Kurukshetra. Never had there been such a slaughter.

Duryodhana wept every day as the mighty Bhima killed more of his brothers.

On the eighth day, in spite of Bhisma, the Kaurava army suffered greatly. Duryodhana went to Bhisma's tent with tears in his eyes. "I fear you love the Pandavas more than you do me. Your heart is not in the fight. Nobody can equal you in battle and yet we are having heavy losses every day," he said.

The old man's face grew pale with anger. "I told you before you started fighting that I would not touch the sons of Pandu. I brought them up and love them dearly. Yet I am not the traitor you seem to think. A warrior like me, once he enters the field of battle, has no thought for anything except his honour. I shall fight to the utmost, but remember, Arjuna commands divine weapons and if he uses them we are doomed," he said. Then he added a little more kindly. "Do not fear. Tomorrow I shall show them what Bhisma can do."

The next day, Bhisma fought furiously indeed. Fearless of death he was everywhere at once, cutting down the Pandava army. He struck off heads, felled elephants and shattered chariots.

The Pandavas were aghast at such slaughter. Again and again they re-grouped their lines and again and again Bhisma scattered them.

That evening Dharmaputra was sunk in gloom.

"Arjuna is not fighting to kill Bhisma," said Krishna.

Dharmaputra looked at his brother and Arjuna hung his head in shame.

"How can I kill my grandfather?" he asked in anguish.

"You will have to if you wish for victory. One day more of this slaughter and your army will disappear," said Krishna.

"Arjuna, this is war. Use your divine weapons against Bhisma," whispered Dharmaputra.

Arjuna silently bowed his head.

On the tenth day, Bhisma blazed forth in anger and his arrows cut through living flesh. He let fly so many that the sky was clouded and the earth shrouded in shadows. There was great confusion amidst the Pandava forces.

"Now is your chance," said Krishna, and he drove Arjuna right into the thick of the fray.

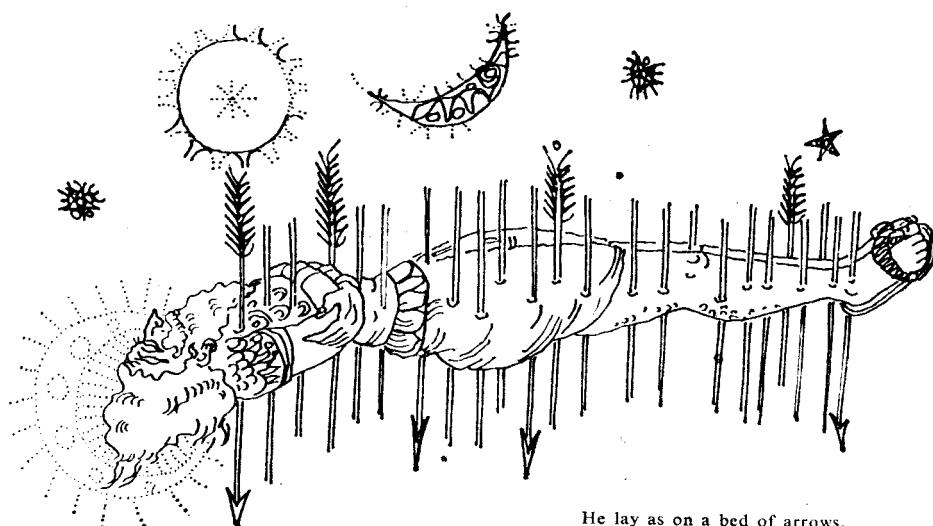
Arjuna hardened his heart and at last summoned his celestial



"Felled elephants."

weapons. The Kauravas saw that their commander-in-chief was hard pressed and crowded round him trying to protect him.

Bhismā cut down Arjuna's arrows most skilfully, but Arjuna doggedly kept on. It was a marvellous duel, thrilling to behold. Chanting mantras each brought out more and more arrows that flew from their bows like streaks of lightning. Finally, greatly incensed, Arjuna took out the weapons of Indra, and at once the speed of his arrows increased. Bhismā began to lag behind. The stone-hearted old warrior, try as he might, could not equal the speed of Arjuna's sharp-pointed arrows. At last, his strength began to fail and he faltered. His hands wavered and he staggered. Arjuna's arrows now burnt deep holes into his flesh and soon Bhismā was covered with them. The powerful son of Ganga swayed in his chariot and finally stumbled to the ground. His body did not touch the earth, so full of arrows was it. He lay as on a bed of arrows.



He lay as on a bed of arrows.

As Bhismā fell, the hearts of the Kauravas fell with him. Cries of sorrow rent the air. Drona heard the news and almost fainted with grief. The fighting stopped and all the kings on both sides gathered round the fallen hero.

"Noble Bhisma, fearless champion," they murmured.

His face was ghastly pale. Blood oozed from the arrow wounds. With dazed eyes, he gazed at the kings around him.

"My head hangs down, bring me a support," he said.

With an understanding smile, Arjuna sent three sharp arrows into the ground. Bhisma sighed as he rested his head on them. Looking at Arjuna tenderly, he said. "My son, I am thirsty. Give me a drink of water."

Tears flooded Arjuna's eyes as he chanted some mantras and sent an arrow into the earth. Miraculously a jet of pure water gushed forth and Arjuna gently revived his grandfather with a cool drink.

Gasping for breath, Bhisma turned to Duryodhana. "I can fight no more and have but a few days longer to live. Let me see you make peace before I die. Stop this fighting and be friends. Did you not see the miracle of the water Arjuna gave me? He knows the secret of divine weapons and is invincible. Your efforts to defeat him will be vain. Let the battle end here with me," he begged. Duryodhana turned his head away in obstinate silence.

Bhisma was carried into his tent and tended with great care. He lived, lying on his bed of arrows for many days.

CHAPTER 15

After Bhisma fell, Karna, who had so far held himself aloof, stepped into the breach. He found the camp gloomy and silent. The Kaurava army had had a shock but at the sight of Karna, the soldiers stirred and cheered him lustily. Karna revived their spirits with words of courage and determination.

"Make Drona your commander-in-chief. With him at the head and me at the rear your army will become invincible. Have no fear. I shall scatter your enemies to the winds," he said to Duryodhana.

The Kaurava prince felt restored and he installed Drona as his commander with renewed hopes in his heart.

"What are your orders, prince Duryodhana?" asked Drona.

"Capture Dharmaputra and bring him to me," came the reply.

"Easily done if Arjuna could only be drawn away. He guards his brother most carefully," said Drona.

"Leave that to me," cried the king of Trigarta. "I shall challenge him and take him to the south of the field."

The next day, the king of Trigarta did as he had promised and drew Arjuna away to another part of the field.

Before leaving, Arjuna said to Dharmaputra. "The Trigarta hosts have challenged me and I must go and fight them. Whilst I am away be careful, for the Kauravas might try to capture you. Keep Bhima or Abhimanyu near you."

That day, Drona had drawn up the army in a circular formation. At the centre was Duryodhana with Karna and Duchasana. Near the narrow entrance at the circumference stood Drona with Aswathama, Sakuni and the king of Sindh.

On the Pandava side, Draupada determined to strike first hoping thus to thwart any attempt on Dharmaputra. He ordered a charge with Bhima at the head.

Drona's array, however, was too strong and the Pandavas could not move or break it. It was impossible to enter through the gap, for there Drona stood on guard, flinging back all those who tried to come near.

Dharmaputra turned to Abhimanyu. "Dear son, we cannot break this formation of Drona's. Only Arjuna and Krishna have the expert knowledge to do so, and they are not here. I know Krishna taught you some of his battle lore. Lead us. Think how Arjuna will praise you when he hears of your brave deed."

The boy gave a radiant smile. "I know only how to enter. If I am caught I shall not be able to return," he said.

"We shall follow close behind and see that you are not caught," said Bhima.

Laughing, his handsome face glowing with courage, the son of Arjuna rode out defiantly in his chariot of golden steeds and peacock banner. With sure knowledge, he plunged in and, cleverly cutting the lines, carved his way into the inner ring.

Bhima and the twins tried to follow him but the king of Sindh blocked their way. He opposed them and while they fought him, the circle closed, leaving Abhimanyu alone within the enemy lines.

There, in the centre of the Kaurava circular array, he found himself surrounded by Duryodhana, Sakuni, Karna and others, but he fought on, fearlessly. The others were amazed at his courage. Drona watched in admiration.

"How well he fights! Here is a son of Arjuna. You cannot pierce his armour. I taught the secret to Arjuna and Abhimanyu has learnt it from him. The only way to overcome him is to attack him from behind," he said.

Karna heard him and quickly cut away Abhimanyu's bow from behind him. Drona killed his horses, another Kaurava warrior splintered the chariot. The boy stood on the ground dazed for a moment. Then with renewed spirit he seized a sword and a shield and attacked Drona. The Kaurava warriors now became

merciless. One shattered the blade of his sword, another struck at his shield hacking through and bursting it. Still unafraid, Abhimanyu took up a mace. Duchasana's son now came charging down on him. The two cousins fought fiercely with their maces. Then it was that Abhimanyu felt his strength ebbing away, for he had long fought against heavy odds and was faint with exhaustion. He staggered to the ground. Before he could rise, Duchasana's son struck him a mortal blow on the head. Arjuna's son lay dead like a wild elephant slain by a hunter. The Kauravas blew their conches in triumph. The Pandava troops retreated in confusion. Evening fell on the battle field.

"How can I break the news to Arjuna when he returns?" groaned Dharmaputra, desolate with grief. The other brothers sat round him weeping silently and awaiting Arjuna with dread in their hearts.

At last they heard the sound of his well-known conch, proclaiming victory. He was returning after having slain the Trigartas.

The camp seemed unusually quiet. No drums, no welcoming shouts of joy greeted him. Arjuna was puzzled at the manner in which those who met him turned their faces away.

"Krishna, what has happened? Why is every one looking so mournful? Why hasn't Abhimanyu rushed out to meet me as usual?" asked Arjuna as he hurried into Dharmaputra's tent.

They told him. At first Arjuna sat stunned as if bereft of his senses. Then tears blinded his eyes. "Sweet youth, brave hero, how can I live without seeing your beloved face again?" he said and wept bitterly.

Gradually, he learnt what had happened. When he heard how Abhimanyu had been alone and how six Kaurava warriors had set upon him treacherously, his grief turned to rage. His eyes blazed and his lips quivered.

"I shall kill all of them and that right now, but the king of Sindh shall be the first. It was he who blocked the path and

imprisoned Abhimanyu alone within the enemy ranks. Either I strike off his head by sunset tomorrow, or kill myself," declared Arjuna.

A blare of trumpets greeted this terrible oath. Arjuna looked as if he were the very messenger of death itself. With flaming eyes and clenched teeth, he stood legs planted wide apart twanging his Gandiva.

The king of Sindh heard the dread sound where he was sitting with the Kauravas and grew pale with terror. He knew the Pandava prowess only too well. "I have done my share. Let me go home now whilst I still may," he said to Duryodhana.

"Do not be afraid. We shall stand by you and protect you with our very lives," said the Kaurava prince, and Drona nodded his agreement.

CHAPTER 16

The next morning, Drona made a most complicated formation and placed the king of Sindh in the centre of it. Then he posted the other Kaurava warriors in such a manner that to reach the king of Sindh, Arjuna would have to fight not only Drona but all the rest of them.

Clad in his shining armour, his jewelled diadem sparkling in the sunlight, Arjuna drove out swinging his Gandiva. Two Panchala princes guarded his wheels from the rear.

"Look Arjuna, there is Drona but pay no heed to him. If you do, you will not reach the king of Sindh before sunset. Pass him by and try to cut through the lines near where your prey is," said Krishna.

"Halt, Arjuna, and give me battle," said Drona.

Arjuna hesitated, for a warrior never ignores a challenge, but Krishna drove swiftly on.

"How could you let him go? I see that you too love them as Bhisma did. Go and catch him up or else he will kill the king of Sindh," said Duryodhana.

"The Pandava army is attacking our outer array and Dharmaputra is with them. If I stay here I might be able to capture Dharmaputra. Why do you not fight Arjuna yourself? You are a king and a hero," said Drona.

"I? Do you think I could?" Duryodhana looked doubtful.

"Why not? Arjuna cannot hurt you if my hands fasten your armour. Look, this is how it must be worn," and so saying, Drona put Duryodhana's armour on him chanting a few mantras as he did so. Then giving him words of praise and encouragement he sent him off after Arjuna.

Krishna drove fearlessly full tilt into the enemy lines and

Arjuna dispersed the warriors with showers of arrows. They were nearly within sight of the king of Sindh.

Just then Duryodhana rode to the attack. Arjuna thought that he would drive him away with a few sharp-pointed arrows. To his surprise he found his cousin's armour was invulnerable. His wonderful arrows just glanced away from Duryodhana's chest. The Pandava guessed what had happened. Swiftly he killed Duryodhana's horses and the charioteer. Then he broke his bow into bits and shattered his sword. So fierce was the attack that even Duryodhana's gloves were torn into shreds. Completely disarmed, the Kaurava prince had to flee from the field to save himself.

In the outer array, a most bloody battle was going on. The Pandava army was hammering at the Kauravas and Drona was striving to stay the tide.

It was late in the evening and the sun was about to set when Arjuna reached the king of Sindh after driving off several of the Kaurava warriors.

The king was closely guarded by Karna, Aswathama and some others. A fearful battle followed. The sky was darkened by a storm of javelins, arrows and feathered darts. Arjuna's arrows blazed through them all. There seemed no end to the slaughter, and yet he had not broken through the guards and got to grips with the king.

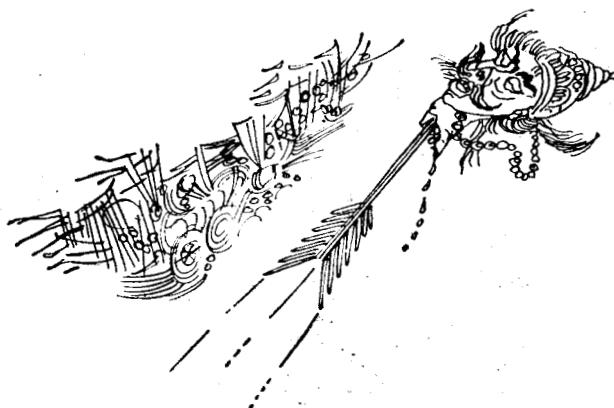
"Arjuna, hurry up, you have not much time left before sunset," said Krishna. Arjuna continued, but he got no nearer. Krishna then intervened and made the sun god disappear for a time behind a dark cloud. The Kaurava warriors paused in surprise at the sudden onset of darkness. Taking advantage of this, Arjuna aimed a torrent of arrows. Wounded and dazed, the warriors drew back, leaving the king unprotected.

"Shoot," commanded Krishna.

At once one of Arjuna's fatal arrows pierced the head of the king of Sindh and flew into the sky with it.

The sun shone brightly once again and Arjuna's vow was fulfilled. Duryodhana was near despair but gathering up all his courage, he ordered a fresh charge, although twilight had set in.

Once more the two armies met with a deafening clash as if oceans were breaking. Night fell but the battle continued. Lamps flickered from the chariots and the backs of elephants while the foot soldiers carried torches. The darkness seemed everlasting, the fight endless. At last, utterly worn out and weary, the two armies lay down on the field of battle and fell asleep. Horses champed softly, elephants snorted and warriors nodded in their chariot seats. For a while, there was deep peace on the field of Kurukshetra.



Fatal arrow pierced the head of the king.

Dawn rose on the fifteenth day of the battle. Drona stood proudly at the head of the Kaurava army. In spite of the hard fighting of the previous night he was in high spirits and stood as straight in his chariot as a young man.

Full of brave resolve to kill him that day, the Pandava warriors attacked him in a band. Duryodhana, Sakuni and others

gathered round Drona and tried to guard him. There was a bitter struggle and many single combats.

Almost the first to fall to Drona's lethal arrows were the aged monarchs, Drupada and Virata. Seeing his father killed, Draupada rushed into the fray, swearing vengeance. Duryodhana engaged Nakula in combat. Karna and Bhima strove each against the other and Duchasana struggled with Sahadeva.

At last Drona and Arjuna met face to face. They were so well matched and their aim so sure and quick that the other warriors lowered their weapons to watch the duel.

Drona consumed Arjuna's arrows as fire would pieces of straw and Arjuna destroyed Drona's weapons with his divine ones. All the while Krishna whirled the chariot in circles with uncanny skill. It was a thrilling fight.

"It is no use, Arjuna. You know only too well that Drona is invincible. The gods themselves cannot defeat him," said Krishna as he watched the fierce combat.

"What shall we do, for win the war we must," cried Bhima, who together with Dharmaputra had just come up and heard Krishna's words.

Krishna thought for a while and then said: "There is no way out of it unless he himself, of his own accord, gives up fighting."

Bhima looked about him feeling at a loss. What could happen to make Drona give up fighting?

Just then, the elephant Aswathama came charging up the lines. Trumpeting loudly, it lifted up its trunk in the air as if challenging Bhima to a fight.

Krishna gave Bhima a meaningful look and Bhima understood. Rushing at the elephant, he quickly hacked it to pieces. Then he went up to Drona and said boldly. "I have killed Aswathama."

Drona trembled with the shock of the news but remembering his son's valour, he refused to believe he could be killed.



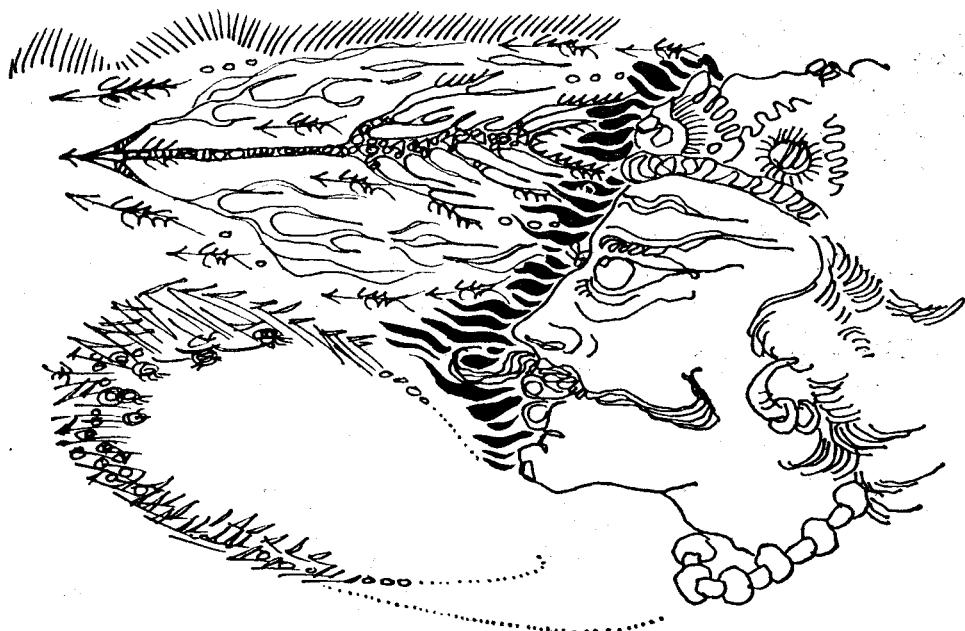
It lifted up its trunk.....challenging
Bhima to fight.

He turned to Dharmaputra: "Is this true? Answer me, is Aswathama dead?"

For a brief second, Dharmaputra hesitated. His conscience smote him. Then he spoke falteringly: "It is true. Aswathama is dead."

At that moment Dharmaputra realised how much he longed to gain a kingdom by winning the war.

"Dharmaputra, the very soul of honour has spoken. My son is truly dead," muttered Drona.



Aswathama's special weapon.

Losing all hope and overcome with sorrow, he sank back into his chariot. The bow slipped from his nerveless hand and he sat still as if in a trance. The war waging around him could interest him no more.

Draupada saw his chance. Burning to avenge his father, he leapt from his chariot and running up to Drona seized him by the hair.

"No, no, do not lift your hand against our great teacher," cried Arjuna, speeding to the defence. He was too late. The deed was done and the white head of Drona rolled to the ground.

The Kaurava army fled in panic and the Pandava trumpets blared out their victory.

When Aswathama heard the news, he was blind with fury. "I shall dash the laughter from their lips. They shall smile no more. Today my divine weapons shall lay bare the field of Kurukshetra and the Pandavas shall pay for this fraud and treachery. Come Duryodhana, to arms, my brave prince," he cried.

The Kaurava army rallied under Aswathama. Once more, that day, with a great uproar, the two armies met.

"How is it they have returned? I thought we had driven them away," said Dharmaputra.

"It is Aswathama. He is rallying them. He will never forgive Draupada for the way he slew our beloved Drona. You too lied to him. How could you? He trusted you and asked you for the truth," said Arjuna.

"In war all things are fair. Drona deserved to die. Did he not with five others, mercilessly set upon the lone Abhimanyu and kill him? Was that true chivalry?" asked Bhima.

"You are right. We are warriors and in war we kill. I was given to my father by the gods to kill Drona and I killed him. In what have I done wrong, Arjuna? You killed your grandfather Bhisma, didn't you?" said Draupada.

Meanwhile, in his rage, the son of Drona darkened the sky with his divine weapons. They burnt the Pandava soldiers like fire. The earth was strewn with the dead and the grass ran red with blood. Wishing to wipe out the Pandavas at one blow, Aswathama took out a special weapon and chanting a powerful mantra, hurled it forth. At once thousands of blazing arrows with fiery tongues filled the air. "Lie down, lie down quickly, all of you," said Krishna. The whole Pandava army, lay down and the powerful missile passed over their heads.

CHAPTER 17

Now that Drona was no more, Duryodhana appointed Karna as his commander. On the seventeenth day of the battle, Karna promised Duryodhana that he would kill Arjuna that very day.

"Today, Arjuna shall die. Victory will be ours and you shall rule the earth," said Karna.

The two armies mingled like the currents of the Ganga and the Yamuna, turbulent and stormy. In the turmoil, Karna came upon Dharmaputra. "Ah, here is a Pandava," he cried and set upon him. Dharmaputra fought bravely but Karna pierced him with many sharp arrows, damaging his armour and destroying his bow. He wounded him grievously and was just about to strike him to death when he remembered his promise to Kunti and stayed his hand.

At that moment, Bhima arrived. Seeing Dharmaputra so hard-pressed, he drew his bow and shot an arrow at Karna which threw him senseless on the floor of his chariot. His charioteer had to drive him away quickly from the field.

Bhima advanced with a loud war cry into the thickest of the fight. It was then that Duchasana attacked him.

"There you are. At last I have found you. You shall die today," cried Bhima.

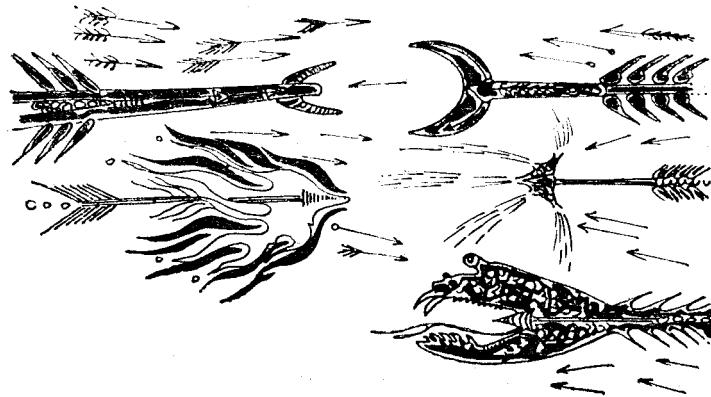
Long and fierce was the duel they fought and many the weapons they used. In the end, Duchasana hurled a javelin at Bhima. Bhima flung his mace and it not only broke the javelin but struck Duchasana to the ground. Looking down on him, Bhima remembered the great insult to Draupadi. A gust of anger shook him. Jumping down from his chariot, he drew his sword and cut open Duchasan's breast. Then, bending down, he sucked the flowing blood and danced with savage joy.

At last Arjuna and Karna came face to face. Once more the warriors around them stopped fighting and watched them in



Bhima's mace struck Duchasana.

humble admiration. The two handsome, godlike heroes stood ready for battle with gleaming bows in their hands. From Karna's eyes blazed the fierce fire of the sun god. From Arjuna's bow flew thunderbolts like Indra's missiles. They were both the sons of gods and now stood, equally matched, to measure their strength once for all on the field of battle. Both had white horses to their chariots which neighed and rose high in the sky in beautiful curves. Like two stormclouds the two heroes met and fought.



Arrows flew. Some were crescent-shaped, others feathered.

They called upon their divine weapons. Arrows flew. Some were crescent-shaped, some feathered and others boar-toothed. Arjuna launched the missile of the god of fire. Karna quenched it with the weapon of the god of the waters. Arjuna fired the wind god's missile but Karna stopped it in mid air with another powerful mantra. So the battle went on and on until at last Karna resolved to use his most powerful weapon, the snake-mouthed arrow which for long he had kept in reserve for Arjuna. He took aim.

Krishna knew how venomous was the arrow and he pressed the chariot down to the earth with his feet. At once the wheels sank in the mud and the white horses bent their knees. The terrible snake weapon whizzed past Arjuna's head snatching off the jewelled crown that Indra had given him long ago. Blazing with anger Arjuna fired hundreds of sharp arrows in return. Torn by wounds, the son of the sun god tottered in his chariot. Then taking hold of himself he pulled out an iron arrow and shot straight at Arjuna's heart. The Pandava felt his head was on fire. For a moment he trembled and Gandiva slipped from his hands.

"What a pity you cannot use Siva's weapon. Karna is not mighty enough," murmured Krishna.

Just then the wheels of Karna's chariot stuck in the mud and he jumped out to free them. Arjuna recovered. Shaking off the mistiness from his eyes, he took up his bow once again and drew its string.

"A moment's grace whilst I free my wheel. The laws of chivalry forbid you to strike an unready foe," cried Karna.

"It is well that you remember chivalry now, Karna. Your memory failed you, I think, when the six of you together fell upon the lone boy Abhimanyu. What thought of chivalry had you when Draupadi was dragged into court?" cried Krishna.

Goaded by the memory of all they had suffered, Arjuna did not hesitate. He drew his bow and the fatal arrow sped through the air. Karna's beautiful head flew off his body. The great son of the sun god fell to the ground, shining like burnished gold. Sadly, the setting sun mourned over the blood splattered earth.

The eighteenth day of the battle dawned. Duryodhana who had been weeping all night for his friend Karna, shook off his grief and arrayed his army afresh.

"Make peace with the Pandavas. It is useless to fight them any more without Karna, Drona or Bhisma," said Aswathama.

Duryodhana scorned his words. "Do you think I have fallen so low that I would now try to save myself when all those who fought for me lie dead on the field? Enough of such cowardly talk," he said. Then brandishing his sword he cried. "To arms, to arms."

Inspired, the Kaurava warriors rose as one man and rode into battle with proud set faces.

That day saw the end of Duryodhana's eleven divisions. Never had there been such slaughter. Men were hurled from their elephants and broken bodies lay piled in heaps. Chariots were blown into a hundred pieces. The Pandava heroes leapt from their chariots, drew their swords and ranged all over the field. Even Dharmaputra was seized by the lust of battle. The gentle king killed the king of Madra in a frenzy of fury. Each brother struck down hundreds; some they wounded, others were beheaded. Bhima slew the remaining Kaurava brothers. Sahadeva killed the dice-player, Sakuni. The dead lay sprawling on the field. On the Pandava side too the loss was heavy but with victorious shouts they tracked down and killed every enemy soldier. Three warriors, Aswathama and two others were all that was left of the grand army of the Kauravas. Spent, wounded and desolate, these three took refuge under a tree.

Duryodhana stood alone on the field of death. The blood gushed from a wound on his shoulder and his senses reeled with the pain. His brain seemed to burst and his eyes grew misty. He was without his chariot or his arms. He staggered to a lake on the east side of the battle field and sank his tired limbs into the water. Here the Pandavas found him.

"Why have you fled here like a coward, Duryodhana? Come out and fight, hero that you are," said Dharmaputra.

"I am not here to save my life. I came to rest for a while. I am wounded. My horses have been killed and my quivers are empty," said Duryodhana.

"Why should you alone need rest? We too are tired and wounded but we shall not give up the fight until we have won," said Bhima.

"All those with whom I wanted to enjoy my wealth and power are now dead. I no longer wish to rule the world. Have it for yourself, Dharmaputra," said Duryodhana.

Dharmaputra laughed. "You would not give me a needle point of land when I asked for it but now you offer me the whole of it after you have already lost it. Thank you, I do not want a gift from you. We shall take the land after the battle is won. Come out and fight," said Dharmaputra.

Duryodhana sighed. "How harsh eighteen days of fighting have made you. As you wish. I shall fight you one by one, on foot and in single combat for I have neither chariot, horses nor arrows," said Duryodhana.

"Well said, Duryodhana. You have spoken like a brave man. Take me on, first," said Bhima.

"Take your time. Put on your armour and choose your own weapon," said Dharmaputra.

The Kaurava prince got out of the lake, dripping with blood and water. He took up the mace and faced Bhima.

"Remember the lac palace! Remember the insult to Draupadi," cried Bhima.

"Don't waste words. Begin," said Duryodhana shortly.

The two heroes rushed at each other. Their maces smashed together and threw off sparks. They moved round, now advancing, now retreating and then crashing together. Duryodhana struck Bhima on the chest. The great giant was stunned for a moment.

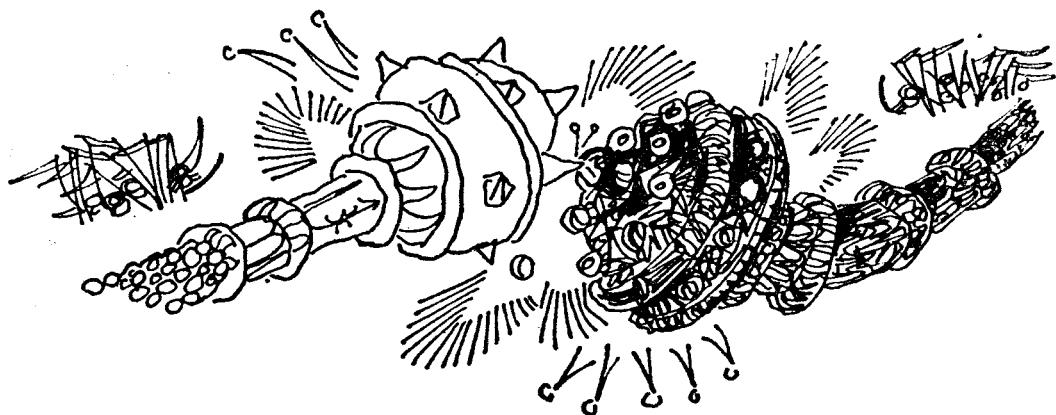
Recovering, he threw his cousin down with a shout. The Pandavas cheered. Duryodhana rose up and ran at Bhima with fury. Whirling his mace he brought it down with such violence that Bhima's armour broke open. He tottered under the blow and blood spurted from his side. The Pandavas were stricken with dread.

"Bhima has forgotten his oath. Did he not swear he would break Duryodhana's thighs in battle?" said the soft voice of Krishna who was also watching.

Bhima heard him. Bleeding all over and breathing hard, he lifted his mace to hurl it at Duryodhana. The Kaurava prince jumped into the air to avoid it. Seeing his chance Bhima struck at Duryodhana's thighs.

The great Kaurava fell down twitching with pain. His thighs were broken and he was in agony. All colour had gone from his face and he knew that death was very near. The sun was sinking in the western sky. Painfully, between gasps of breath, he spoke.

"I have lived well, performed great sacrifices and conquered many kingdoms. I have had many friends to whom I gave wealth and love. I have no regrets, for none could be as fortunate as I have been. Now I die in glory on the battle field as a hero and shall go to paradise, the place of everlasting bliss."



"Their maces smashed together."

Dharmaputra looked at his fallen cousin in sorrow. In this hour of victory there was no joy in his heart. "Alas! We have done wrong to kill our own kith and kin," he said in mournful tones.

He bent down lovingly in an attempt to lift his cousin up. Gently, Krishna stopped him. "I know your grief, but what has come to pass had to be. You must learn to bear the calamity. Let us spend the night on the banks of the Ganga to atone for the sin of killing, by bathing in her sacred waters and return to camp in the morning," he said.

The five brothers and Krishna slept on the banks of the Ganga that night.



The charred remains of the Pandava camp.

CHAPTER 18

"Duryodhana, are you alive? Can you hear me?"

It was Aswathama who spoke. Soon after the Pandavas had left, he had found Duryodhana, grimy and bloodstained, lying on the ground near the lake.

Duryodhana moaned. He was very weak from loss of blood and could hardly move. The pain in his thighs was unbearable. He knew death could not be far off.

"Hear me; I am here to avenge you," said Aswathama.

At this the Kaurava prince opened his eyes but he could hardly see. "All is lost, Aswathama. It is too late now to help," he whispered.

Aswathama sprang to his feet, his eyes aflame with anger. "I heard Bhima struck you below the waist. It was a most dastardly act. What Draupada did to my father was even more infamous. These cowards! Who calls them heroes? I shall have

their blood in revenge this very night. Hold fast to your life. I shall bring you good news before the night is out. I swear to you that I shall wipe out the whole of the Pandava camp."

A faint light flickered in Duryodhana's eyes. "My true friend, go and may God aid you," he said with some return of spirit.

Aswathama and his two friends rode out and the dark night swallowed them.

Duryodhana was once more alone, struggling with death.

"Where are you going?" said Aswathama's companion.

"To the Pandava camp. I shall murder them in cold blood when they are asleep," said Drona's son.

His friend looked shocked. "That would be the basest act of all. You cannot do it. Wait till the morning and fight them straight," he said.

"Why should I? Did Arjuna wait till Karna was ready to fight? Did Draupada wait until my father took up his arms? The Pandavas have broken every rule of battle. They deserve no fair play. I shall kill them all in their beds," said Aswathama.

Silently they entered the Pandava camp. No one stirred. After eighteen days of hard fighting, they were tired and fast asleep.

"Stay here, at the entrance and kill without mercy all those who try to escape," Aswathama said to one of his friends. "Take a torch and set fire to the whole camp," he said to the other.

Then he crept in softly and found Draupada soundly sleeping in his bed. Tortured with grief, he brought down his sword on his neck. Draupada was so deep in sleep that he hardly uttered a cry. Next Aswathama found the five sons of Draupadi and slew them in his fury. Then he sought out the rest of the Pandava kinsmen and killed them pitilessly one by one.

Blood-curdling shrieks broke out and the camp woke up. The soldiers did not know what was afoot. Groping in the dark,

they scrambled into armour and fearing the enemy was in their midst began killing each other. Drowsy with sleep, some of them tried blindly to find the entrance and were promptly killed by Aswathama's friend. Fire broke out. Elephants and horses ran amuck stampeding thousands to death. In the darkness and confusion, the Pandava army destroyed itself. Burning with anger, Aswathama helped in the slaughter.

At last the terrible struggle came to an end. There was a deadly silence for not a soul was left alive. Aswathama looked around. It was a camp of the dead.

Bathed in blood, sword in hand, he strode out, mounted his chariot and hastened to Duryodhana. "Good news, Duryodhana. The deed is done. The Panchalas and the Matsyas have been slain. Draupada is dead and the Pandavas have no heir now to inherit their vast kingdom. All their sons and kinsmen have been killed. The whole camp is in ruins and not a man is alive," said Aswathama.

Duryodhana's eyes, dim with death, suddenly filled with joy. "Aswathama, great indeed is your service. You have done what even Bhisma, Drona and Karna could not do. You have wiped out the Pandava family". Then he turned his head heavenward. "To paradise, to eternal bliss, I go in deep content," he murmured and his head sank into his chest.

When the Pandavas returned to camp in the morning, a horrible scene met their eyes. Hacked and cut to pieces, the bodies of their sons and kinsmen lay in heaps amidst the charred remains of the camp. Dharmaputra fell down faint with the shock.

"We thought we had conquered but it is we who have been vanquished. All these mighty warriors who fought so bravely in battle have found a most inglorious end. Of what use is the kingdom to us now? With whom shall we share the enormous wealth that is now ours?" he asked in piteous tones. Drowned in sorrow, the Pandavas were unable to tear themselves away from their dead.

Krishna spoke words of comfort to them. "Death is grievous

only for those who think it is the end of life. You should know better, for your kinsmen are enjoying never-ending happiness in paradise. Wipe away your tears, Dharmaputra. The duties of a king await you at Hastinapura," he said.

A messenger brought the dreadful news to king Dhritarashtra. "The kings who came from far and near to fight this battle are no more. The Pandavas have won. Your sons are slain but the world is bereft of the warrior race for the Pandava clan too has been wiped out by Aswathama," he said.

The blind king fell down like a tree struck by lightning and Gandhari sobbed bitterly. Vidura tried in vain to comfort them. Crushed, bowed down by sorrow, the old king, together with Gandhari, Kunti and the people of the city left for the battle field to see their dead. Krishna and the Pandavas met them half way.

Dharmaputra bowed to his uncle. The old king embraced him but his heart was bitter with resentment. Gandhari too could not forgive them for killing all her sons. Often, while Duryodhana was alive she had tried to curb his ambition. She had even blamed him for the war but now that he was dead her mother's heart was sore with grief.

"You could have spared me at least one son," she said to Bhima.

Then her anger turned against Krishna and she looked at him in wrath. "You are the true cause of all this. It was your words that goaded the Pandavas into those unfair acts that sent Drona, Karna and Duryodhana to their deaths. May your kinsmen destroy each other as mine did and may you too suffer in your last hours as I do," she cried in anguish.

Krishna sighed. "Gandhari, in war nothing is fair or unfair. Duryodhana has paid with his life for his greed and insolence. The Pandavas did only what they had to do" he said.

When they reached the battlefield, Krishna led Gandhari to her sons. She threw herself on their bodies and wailed loudly. Stumbling and moaning, the women of Hastinapura who had lost their sons and husbands, roamed over the plain, seeking their dear ones.

It was then at last that Kunti revealed the story of Karna's birth. "Karna, the great archer, was your brother. He was my eldest, begotten by the sun god," she said to the Pandavas. Flinging herself on him who, even in death, was like the morning sun, Kunti wept as only a mother weeps.

"If only I had known, this war would never have been," said Dharmaputra heavily and, turning aside, refused all comfort. "Without my loved ones, life has no longer any meaning for me. A crown so won weighs heavy on my head. Let me retire to the forest".

Draupadi, herself grieving for her slaughtered sons, tried to restore his spirits, and so did his brothers, but in vain. Utterly dejected, Dharmaputra thought of the valiant Abhimanyu, the heroic Karna and the noble Bhisma. He remembered how he had helped to kill his beloved Drona with a lie, and he could find no peace.

Krishna spoke to him in tender tones. "Dear Dharmaputra, a king's duty is to be with his subjects. Time enough to retire when your task here is done. Grief and hopeless despair are enemies of the soul, and I see that, though you have conquered the enemies of the battlefield, those of the heart remain. Shake them off and set your mind to the duties that await you as king. Remember, only a king whose mind is peaceful can bring happiness to his people". These words affected Dharmaputra deeply and he steadied himself.

The Pandavas entered Hastinapura in State. The streets of the ancient capital of the Kurus were packed with people. The

crowds swelled like the ocean and the conquerors were received with loud acclamations. Amidst great pomp, Dharmaputra was crowned.

After the coronation festival, the king thought of his grandfather Bhisma still lying on his bed of arrows, near the scene of battle. Knowing he could choose his time of death because of his father's boon he awaited the auspicious hour. Dharmaputra hastened to him.

"Grandfather, I want to rule as you would have me do. Please teach me all that you know. What are the duties of the four castes? What is the way of life that each should follow? What are the duties of a king and whom should he trust? Tell me how a kingdom grows. Teach me your great wisdom," he begged.

Then the great Bhisma, remembering the Vedas and all that he had learnt from the sages, spoke to King Dharmaputra on Dharma, or the true way of life. He also taught him the high duties of a king. The Pandavas sat round and listened to the wisdom of the world from Bhisma's lips.

As days went by the old man's voice grew fainter and fainter until at last the colour faded from his face and he knew that he could no longer put off the hour of departure.

"My son, the time has come when I must leave for my heavenly home. God bless you. You shall rule long and be famous throughout the world," he said.

His soul then left his body and rose to heaven gleaming like a star.

As he had prophesied the Pandavas grew in fame and their kingdom prospered. King Dharmaputra ruled the earth in great glory and justice for thirtysix years. Never before had the world seen such a king as the good and gentle Dharmaputra. Yet the Pandavas themselves found no happiness in life, for they lived ever mourning their dead.



Bhism's soul rose to heaven gleaming like a star.

The king took tender care of his uncle and Gandhari but they could not recover from their sorrow and slowly dwindled and died. Kunti too died of old age.

At last came the evil news, for which Dharmaputra had been waiting in dread ever since Gandhari's curse. There had been a terrible disaster at Dwaraka. Krishna's people had fought amongst themselves and perished. The sea had run into the land and submerged it, wiping out the memory of a glorious epoch. Krishna himself was no more.

Krishna gone! The heart of the Pandavas went dry of blood. It would now be a world of darkness. How could they bear to live without their beloved Krishna? They decided they too must go. Dharmaputra crowned Abhimanyu's son as king of Hastinapura. He had been born after the war and was the only heir to the Pandava heritage.

Casting off their royal robes and dressed in the bark of trees, the Pandavas and Draupadi undertook a perilous journey to



Pandavas and Draupadi undertook a perilous journey!

Mount Meru. It was a long and hazardous quest in search of the eternal light but the Pandavas showed the same courage and steadfastness in this as they had in all their other trials. One day, the golden light of the sacred peak appeared before them. The five brothers and Draupadi began the final ascent. From the blinding halo of its liquid glow, Indra himself came out to take them to the land of everlasting bliss.

In the "Sons of Pandu", Mrs. Bhoothalingam recounts the main story of the great Indian epic, the Mahabharata. Meant for children, to whom these tales have an enduring appeal, the story is told in a style which is at once simple, direct and imbued with poetry.

Mrs. Bhoothalingam generally writes in Tamil under the pen name Krithika. Her two satirical works, Satyameva and Vasaveshwaram reveal deep understanding of human problems. Satyameva especially is a delicate portrayal of the mental conflicts in our society, reminiscent of the Mahabharata.

The illustrator of this book, the artist Baniprosonno, responds well to the author's style. His way of symbolic drawing, particularly of the battle scenes, is most enthralling.



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